

Botanical Wisdom from West Africa

How Plants Speak in Akan Proverbs

Benjamin Addai Antwi-Boasiako

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*To my mother,
Margaret Aduayaa.*

Preface

The modern mind tends to think that intelligence belongs to those with academic titles and that wisdom must come wearing a suit and tie. Yet, long before European boots walked the shores of what is now Ghana, there were people there who, despite not setting foot in a classroom, possessed a deep understanding of human nature and their environment. They often spoke figuratively, sometimes using plants as metaphors – as if plants could talk.

This behaviour puzzled the Europeans. The missionaries, to their credit, made an effort to listen. In 1854, Reverend Hans N. Riis offered the first known compilation of Akan proverbs. Twenty-five years later, Reverend Johann Christaller gave the world a volume of 3,670 Akan sayings. Then, in 1916, the anthropologist Robert Rattray translated about a quarter of Christaller's collection, which was disrespectfully titled "Primitive Ethics of a Savage People." The usual problem of translation hampered that effort. You see, a proverb in one tongue may survive the journey into another, but it seldom arrives intact. The then Gold Coast Governor, Hugh Clifford, after reading some of the translations, found them too trivial to count as proverbs.

Isn't it always easier to mock what we don't understand? Twi, the Akan language, is richly figurative; its meaning is as twisted as the tree roots it often invokes. Unless you know the plants, animals and patterns of daily life that inspire these sayings, their full sense slips away. It is like reading Shakespeare without some grasp of the English countryside.

Today, sadly, many a Ghanaian youth stands in the same relation to these

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proverbs as did Hugh Clifford. The imagery is fading. The plants and herbs, which once supplied the metaphors, are disappearing. With them vanishes a whole moral ecology. Language, like a tree, grows out of its soil. Uprooted, it withers. The beauty of Twi lies in the images it draws upon, images now at risk of extinction.

This book, *Botanical Wisdom from West Africa*, aims to capture a few of these leaves before they are entirely lost. It focuses on plant-inspired Akan proverbs to illustrate a profound connection with nature. What follows is a witness that my ancestors weren't *savage*, and their ethics were not *primitive*. Their ethics *are* richly human and morally serious.

Of course, as many of these plants have medicinal value, it would be strange to exclude that side of their story. But a note of caution: this book isn't a prescription pad. Ancient remedies, while often efficacious, can be harmful if not handled properly.

I first planted the seed of this book on Facebook. There, in a spirit of light-hearted reflection, I wrote about these sayings. Friends urged me to take it further. And so, relying on the works of scholars like Francis R. Irvine, Peggy Appiah, and Robert Rattray, I began to listen more intently to the old voices. Many of those voices still echo in rural villages and in the fading memories of our elders. Sadly, most of them cannot write.

This book, then, is a small seed, a refusal to let a certain kind of wisdom fade away. If, many years from now, this book offers someone a glimpse into a world nearly forgotten, then I will consider my efforts worthwhile. Modernity may have felled the tree of wisdom, but this book may be a fresh, green bud rising from its stump.

Benjamin Addai Antwi-Boasiako

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Introduction

In Ghana, as in many other African countries, proverbs are more than mere ornaments of speech. They're the strings that hold together a people's distilled, collective wisdom, handed down from one generation to another. These proverbs are often drawn from the soil, the seasons, the shape of plants and the behaviours of animals.

Yet, for many today, the imagery in proverbs, especially that of plants, is unfamiliar. The natural world, which once stood close, now lies at a distance because of urbanisation. And so, the wisdom embedded in these proverbs can seem obscure, even nonsensical.

This is why *Bu Me Be*, that must-have collection of over 7,000 Akan proverbs edited by Peggy Appiah and others, is such a welcome gift. It offers both literal translations and philosophical interpretations. But even here, there's a problem. The editors assume the reader already knows the world behind the words. For many, though, the bridge between literal image and moral insight is missing.

Take, for example, the proverb *Nsusuaa se: m'ani mmere ntwuropo* (The small garden egg says, "I don't envy the big garden egg"). The authors tell us this expresses the contentment of the insignificant person who desires no greatness. Fair enough. But why garden eggs at all? Why not snails, or pumpkins, or ants? The answer, as the book shows on page 147, lies in the very nature of the garden egg itself: its growth, its use, its peculiar relationship to its larger cousin.

This book, then, is my modest attempt to supply what is too often lacking: the background knowledge that restores the link between image and insight. This

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volume focuses on plants only (a sequel will focus on animals). I'm not writing a textbook (heaven forbid!) but a work that I hope you will enjoy. I wander across many fields, including folklore, mythology, psychology, and philosophy. I borrow heavily from *Bu Me Be* but also differ from it when the evidence demands it. Once we uncover the imagery, you'll find that these old sayings are strikingly modern, and more than equal to the so-called deep sayings of Europe or elsewhere.

I'm not a botanist or anthropologist, but someone fortunate enough to have lived close to these things. My qualifications are simple: I'm a native Twi speaker, raised in the Bono and Asante traditions, familiar with the plants and stories they gave. Naturally, my versions of proverbs may differ from those of a Fante or a Kwaahu speaker. Even within my own community, interpretations may vary. That is only to be expected. Proverbs aren't Euclidean theorems. They live and change, and like all living things, they may contradict one another.

Indeed, some would discredit proverbs precisely because of such conflicts. One tells us the early bird gets the worm; another, that the second mouse gets the cheese. Since proverbs speak of people, we should expect such tensions. Economists speak of *adverse selection* and *propitious selection*. Both are empirically true, although they offer opposing views on the likelihood of one buying insurance.

Sometimes, well-meaning people feel tempted to "correct" a proverb by replacing an odd word with one more familiar. For example, *soduro* (hoe handle) becomes *soa koduro* (carrying to its destiny) because the latter is easier to explain. But what if the strangeness isn't an error, but the key? Johann Christaller's 1879 collection uses the term "*soduro*." Rattray, in *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, confirms that after burials, the wooden handles of hoes were broken and left behind. Thus, there is such a thing as a *samanpo mu soduro* (hoe handle of the graveyard). You see, we are more inclined to smooth away the difficult reading. Yet in textual criticism, there is a guiding rule: *Lectio difficilior potior* (the harder reading is more likely to be correct).

In Appendix A, I list the local, English and botanical names of the plants I've discussed. But let's not be too ambitious. Africa is home to over 24,000 plant species, and more than half of them are found nowhere else on Earth. Thus, most don't have English names.

Though I have grouped the essays, each stands on its own, and some may even appear to contradict one another. If they do, it is not because I didn't see them. Life, as I indicated earlier, is full of contradictions. As the ancient Greeks knew, truth often comes in twos. The ideas here aren't always my convictions, but interpretations offered in good faith.

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Let's walk into the forest together. The trees aren't silent, so listen. Indeed, modern science now confirms what ancient myth has long suspected: that trees speak. Beneath the soil, through fungal threads (the *wood wide web*), they send signals, warnings, and even aid to one another. Perseus, in Greek legend, heard oak trees speak in the grove of Dodona. Like Perseus, let us listen, then, with our ears, our imaginations, our memories, our hearts.

Section A: Love and Relationships

This section explores proverbs that address the complex aspects of love, ambition, and the balance between what we desire and what is truly real. It discusses the challenges that can strengthen love and warns about the dangers of being overly arrogant. These essays examine the various aspects of human connection.

1. Prioritise those who prioritise you (abonkuruma)

There is a certain kind of heartbreak that comes from imbalance: from giving more than we receive, from offering loyalty where there is only convenience in return. The world is full of such disappointments. You'll have met people who are quite content to stand at the centre of your world while keeping you at the margins of theirs. It is a form of exploitation, and like many errors, it is as old as humanity.

The Akan proverb the ancients gave us as a warning was blunt, even shocking to modern ears: *Akɔdaa a wammekye na yede abonkuruma sie no* (A child who doesn't come to stay, we use the castor oil plant to bury it). This is no cruelty. It is simply a frank recognition of the human economy of affection. If one hasn't been with us in life, we mustn't make a ceremonial fuss of their departure.

Let's not be sentimental about this. Even love must bow to truth. To pour yourself out for someone who hasn't offered themselves in return is to build a house on the wind. The ancients, in their wisdom, meant to save us from such foolishness by reminding us to love wisely.

Now, before we wrestle further with the proverb, we must spend some time with the *abonkuruma*, the castor oil plant itself. A curious plant, this one: *Ricinus communis* – to give it its botanical name. Its stems are hollow and reddish with broad, star-shaped leaves. It produces both male and female flowers, and its seeds, though they contain oil of great usefulness, are highly poisonous. That paradox, I think, tells us a great deal about life. For in the same thing we find both remedy and danger, both nourishment and death. The castor oil lubricates

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machines and stirs the ingredients of soap, yet the seed also harbours *ricin*, one of the most lethal natural toxins known.

Our ancestors knew all this long before the laboratories did. They boiled the leaves to treat Guinea worm, applied them to feverish foreheads, and brewed potions for purging the body. But more than that, they enlisted the plant in spiritual warfare. The spiny fruits and dry seeds, when set alight, were said to expose witches. Apparently, if a wizard so much as caught a whiff of the smoke, his nose would betray him with a twitch. Whether or not you believe such tales, they reveal a cultural truth: this plant was considered spiritually discerning.



Abonkuruma - Ricinus communis

Yet it also played a gentler, more sombre role. When a child died in infancy (and this happened all too often), they weren't given the elaborate funerary treatment reserved for elders: no carved coffin, no brass band, no mourning cloths. The child's body was wrapped in the leaves of the *abonkuruma* and buried in a box. And this, really, is the heart of the proverb. A child who doesn't stay long enough to become part of the family isn't treated like one who does.

The metaphor is stark, but its moral is clear: don't over-invest in someone who hasn't chosen to stay with you. If someone withdraws their presence, let

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your expectations withdraw with them. There is no shame in setting limits. There is, in fact, great dignity in doing so.

Human instinct, though, encourages the opposite. We're hardwired to chase, to pine, to fight for affection as though it were a scarce resource. Psychology tells us that we begin to desire more intensely the very thing that eludes us. As the singer Tracy Chapman put it: "One wants more when one is denied." And so, we see people humiliated on account of unrequited love.

But love, properly understood, isn't a clinging. It's an exchange. And if no one is on the other side of the exchange, well, then it's no longer love. Mark Twain apparently said, "Never allow someone to be your priority while allowing yourself to be their option." Whether Twain said it or not, the advice is sound. And Grandma would've agreed. So, if you find yourself wrapping your loyalty in silk for someone who brings nothing but apathy in return, perhaps it is time to reach for the leaves of the *abonkuruma*. Let them go. And preserve your dignity.

2. What is done in love is done forever (aburow)

Now, you may need to forget everything I said in the last article. When it comes to love, we don't count as the world counts. Love has a strange kind of arithmetic. It gives without keeping score and commits itself to the long view, even when the terms seem absurd. You may see it most vividly in that sincere question asked at an Akan marriage rite. The elders asked the man: Should she incur debt, it's your responsibility; but if she comes into treasure, she can take it all to her family. Do you agree? And the man, if he is truly ready to love, says, Yes.

This isn't a contract in the legal sense. It is something more enduring. It's a declaration that love isn't a ledger. It's a seed. The promise may look lopsided, but so too is every real commitment. No wonder, then, that the man's mother-in-law might say something like: *Dua me nkateɛ, na nnua me aburow* (Plant me groundnuts, not corn).

At first glance, this might seem like agricultural advice, and very poor advice at that. But we must learn to read the language of the earth with the eyes of the heart.

Let's begin with *aburow* (corn or maize). Maize (*Zea mays*) is everywhere in Ghana, almost a national companion. Every farmer grows it, whether as a main crop or as a secondary crop. It's a generous plant, quick to yield, quick to fail. Especially the variety sown in the leaner months (*apɛsɛ-burow*), which gambles on a rain that may fail. To plant such corn is an act of faith.

And when it fails, as it often does, blame begins to sprout in its place. Our elders knew this well: *Obi apɛsɛ-burow nyɛ yiye a, wɔmfɛ wɔn nan ase akumsuman*

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nkeɛfa mu (If someone's late-season corn fails, don't walk through it; they'll find a way to blame you). The proverb echoes a point that lawyers now refer to as the *eggshell skull rule*: if you harm someone, you take them as they are. You can't use their frailties as a defence.

But corn isn't only vulnerable. It is also jealous. When it tassels (*apensem*), it stretches high, stealing light and air from anything that tries to grow beneath it. And so, the elders warned: *Aburow de ne mpese rekum nnuadewa* (Corn kills vegetables with its tassels). Power, if misused, chokes the smaller lives nearby. Yet corn is a staple. It fills our tables: in *banku*, in porridge (*koko*), in kenkey (*dɔkono*), in roasted kernels (*nkyewee*), crunched with salted peanuts. It serves, but it doesn't linger. Once harvested, it leaves no lasting trace.

Not so with *nkatee* (groundnuts). This is a humbler plant. It creeps instead of towering. It flowers modestly and bears its treasure out of sight, below the soil. Its very botanical name, *Arachis hypogea*, means "nut under the earth." And here lies the wisdom of the proverb.

Groundnuts grow underground, slowly, and often unevenly. Some pods ripen early; others lag behind. Harvest it too soon, and you come away with disappointment. Wait too long, and the pods break off and remain buried, out of reach. But even those lost pods aren't wasted. Left in the soil, they sprout again. Groundnuts planted once often return year after year. Quiet, persistent, fruitful in secret. That is the kind of love our in-laws ask us to plant.

When the mother-in-law says, 'Plant me groundnuts, but not corn,' she is saying, 'Don't love me for a season.' Don't come with fireworks that fizzle by morning. Sow what grows deep. Let love root itself beyond the harvest, beyond the storms. Let it outlast even your own expectations.

It is both a beautiful and a practical metaphor. Groundnuts are a source of nourishment. They become soup, snacks, or oil. They pair well with banana, make sumptuous soup (*nkatenkwan*), and are the basis of the famed nkate-cake and *kuli-kuli* (a crunchy and flavourful snack often enjoyed on its own or as an accompaniment to other dishes). There is even joy in their preparation: roasted whole, crushed into spice, boiled soft and eaten as a dessert.

Such a plant isn't impressive at first glance. It doesn't tassel or tower. It stays. And that, in the end, is the whole point. Love, like groundnuts, must be planted with patience and hope, not with the aim of quick returns. It may not stand tall, but it goes deep. And what is done in love, as the saying goes, is done forever.

So let us not be blinded by grandeur. Let us not mistake passion for permanence. If you wish to love and to be loved in a way that endures, don't reach for the corn. Plant groundnuts. Those oldies were wise!

3. Familiarity breeds contempt (aborɔbɛ)

Once upon a time, there was a fruit that nearly conquered Europe. No, it wasn't the apple of Eden or the fig of the Stoics. It was something far more flamboyant. In 1493, Christopher Columbus encountered the pineapple in the Caribbean, and like many things found in foreign lands, he regarded it with a mixture of wonder and ambition.

He tried to take some of them back to Europe, but the journey was long, and most of the fruit perished. What survived became a delicacy fit only for the few, the exalted few who could afford to display (and rarely eat) a fruit that cost more than an estate. Pineapples graced banquet halls as *symbols*. Their presence declared: *Here resides opulence*.

But time, as it always does, brought change. Steamships hastened the journey of pineapples (resulting in only a few spoiling). Plantations in Hawaii multiplied their supply. And soon the once rare fruit found its way into every grocer's stall, sold for the price of lunch. And in that change, from rare to routine, the pineapple lost something. Not its taste; that remained as golden and sharp as ever. What it lost was its mystery.

Here lies the heart of our matter: what is too readily available is often too easily overlooked. And so, the Akans, in their wisdom, said: *Aborɔbɛ dɛ nko, ankaa nso dɛ nko* (The pineapple is sweet, but so is the orange). They taste differently, yet both have value.

Now, let us speak of the fruit itself. *Ananas comosus* (its botanical name) isn't, strictly speaking, one fruit. There are many. A hundred small berries joining

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forces, growing around a central core, forming what looks like a single golden entity. Unity through complexity, so to speak.

The plant is short and sturdy, its leaves arranged like a sceptre crowned with spikes. The fruit contains *bromelain*, an enzyme that breaks down protein. Perhaps that explains why it leaves a burn on the tongue if taken in excess. It also teems with vitamins, increases appetite, and has found its place in medicine and magic alike. The leaves, boiled or burned, serve varied purposes, including easing women's monthly burdens and, more curiously, treating venereal complaints.

The pineapple also resists extinction. From its base grow slips and suckers; little shoots that, when planted, become whole new plants. And so, the proverb arises: *Aborɔbe ase ntu* (The pineapple never dies out). What is good and rooted well, even when cut down, rises again. You might use this to describe yourself if you have ever been underestimated, cast aside, or told that your time has passed. If there is a root, there is hope.

Yet it is not only the fruit that tells a story. The Twi name itself, *aborɔbe*, is a window into history. In Twi, *borɔ* and *bro* often signal things brought by the Europeans. There is *borɔ-deɛ* (plantain), *borɔ-fere* (pawpaw), *bro-nya* (Christmas), and *abro-kyire* (Europe). *Abo-ɔfo* is the term for Europeans themselves, though whether it means *cruel people* or *those from beyond* is still debated.

Some say the name reflects our ancestors' view of the coloniser's cruelty. The Ga language echoes this: *ablo* means harshness, *ablofelo*, a harsh person. A poetic explanation, and not without merit. However, another possibility, perhaps the more accurate one, is that our ancestors referred to the newcomers as those who came from beyond the horizon. From *aborokyire* (behind the horizon). The ones from the far side of the world.

And so, in a small and spiky fruit, we find the story of a world changed by travel, economy, and expectation. The pineapple, once adored for its rarity, now lies ignored on supermarket shelves. It didn't lose its taste, but it has lost its scarcity. This is the danger of too much closeness. Familiarity, indeed, breeds contempt. A gift that is given too frequently becomes a chore. A presence too constant becomes invisible. The same lips that once sighed, *how precious*, now mutter, *how ordinary*.

Love. Honour. Respect. These, too, are like pineapples. Best preserved by reverence. If we treat what is precious as commonplace, we shall soon have nothing precious at all. So, let us look at the pineapple with the eyes of the proverb-maker, who sees beyond taste to meaning.

4. The water-diamond paradox (aborɔdwomaa)

We often prefer the rare to the useful. A diamond, which serves no practical purpose in hunger or thirst, is more prized than water, without which we would die in days. The philosopher Adam Smith puzzled over this in the 18th century and framed it thus: Why is water, which we need, cheap, and diamonds, which we don't, expensive?

The answer lies in what eludes us. Frederick the Great of Prussia exploited this human instinct. In 1756, fearing that a bread shortage would starve his people, Frederick asked his subjects to grow a strange tuber: the potato. His subjects refused. They saw nothing regal in it. It wasn't sweet. It wasn't biblical. It wasn't beautiful.

Frederick turned to the elixir of psychology. He declared the potato a *royal delicacy*, planted it in his gardens, and surrounded it with guards. However, these guards were under instructions not to be too vigilant. The goal was to tempt them in. And so, the royal fields were soon "raided" by peasants who, in stealing the king's crop, unknowingly spread it across Prussia. What had been scorned became sought after. The potato, like virtue, gained value when it was forbidden.

And yet, one wonders: had the King introduced the *sweet* potato, would his trick have been necessary?

The sweet potato, known in Twi as *aborɔdwomaa*, *saantom* or *ntɔmɔ*, is a different creature altogether. Unlike its plain cousin, it is agreeable to the tongue, comforting to the stomach, and nutritious. Its orange, white, or cream-hued flesh offers both sustenance and delight. It crept from South America to Ghana.

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The plant grows as one who is humble and patient. It doesn't stand upright like maize or yam. It crawls low upon the earth, putting down roots wherever it finds soft soil. But if it finds stone, it fails. It grows in vain. Thus, the Akans say: *Abordwomaa se, m'aforo boɔ afere* (The sweet potato says, I have crawled on a rock to my shame). If you follow your instincts without discernment, you fail. This is a proverb of regret. It speaks of those who follow their impulses heedlessly, ignoring counsel, and end up barren. The sweetness of desire turns sour in hindsight.

Regret, like the sweet potato's vine, trails behind all our decisions. Imagine, if you will, a dilemma: one choice offers a 90% chance at great riches; the other, a modest certainty. The gambler who chooses risk and loses will remember the certainty he declined. He may replay it endlessly, like a poor tune stuck in the mind. Yet even the prudent man may wonder what might have been.

This is the strange paradox of human choice: we fear regret more than failure. And so, we hedge our bets, refuse the bold path, and console ourselves with the potato, not the diamond. Or, worse, we take the diamond and later weep for water.

Yet some choices bear no regret. Frederick the Great, who made potatoes a staple of his people's diet in Germany, left a lasting legacy. Potatoes are everywhere in Germany. I recall, during my studies in Potsdam, walking around the Sanssouci Palace and seeing the King's grave. It was adorned with potatoes. There, on a patch of soil, the royal tuber had found its triumph.

So, we return to our proverb. The sweet potato, when it grows well, provides food and healing. But when it crawls blindly over rock, it withers. And so, it is with us. We must root ourselves in discernment, not desire. We must choose soil, not stone.

5. Love makes requests, not demands (akekaduro)

Let us speak of ginger. That humble root, knotted like an older man's fist, is cherished across many lands for its fragrance, its fire, its manifold healing virtues. In Ghana, however, it bears another reputation, one that extends beyond soups and stews and reaches the very heart of human conduct, where discipline intertwines in troubling ways.

It may begin innocently enough: the moon, a breeze, the hushed laughter of youth. But should a young girl be suspected (only suspected, mind you) of wandering too far into the moonlit attentions of some boy, a severe penalty might await her. Her mother grinds ginger into a pulp and places it where pain is surest: her private part. And the poor girl is expected to carry on as though this burning indignity were nothing more than a summer breeze. But her faltering steps and pained silence tell another tale.

The popular song "*Katatsofa*" by *Buk Bak* is named after this very ordeal. *Katatsofa* is the Ga word for ginger; the Akans call it *akekaduro* ('ache medicine'). The name is fitting, though one wishes the medicine were always chosen with a more tender hand.

Ginger, it must be said, is a marvel. Science names it *Zingiber officinale*. Its gifts are numerous. It soothes inflammations, chases away indigestion, calms cramps, and even assists the body in drawing in iron for blood's work. One may chew it fresh to help fend off colds, and it can be brewed, crushed, or mixed with other herbs to lower blood pressure or relieve coughing. Unlike chillies, whose

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fire comes from *capsaicin*, ginger's own burning warmth arises from *gingerol* and its cousins, compounds that offer both heat and healing.

If you step into a *chop bar* anywhere in Ghana, you'll see grown men grinding ginger with a kind of earnest desperation, as though their very lives depended upon its flavour. And perhaps, in some way, they do.

Now, if I have painted Ghanaian parental discipline as cruel, allow me to amend the picture, for those same adults who wield the ginger as punishment aren't above administering it to themselves. In some instances, they dry the root, roll it into the likeness of a small cylinder, and apply it (let us say discreetly) for health's sake. It's an act of medicine, and no small feat of courage.

But imagine such a cure being applied to an elephant. The sheer quantity of ginger required would beggar belief. Thus, the wise elders say, *Nye obi na jbenya sono tunumu akekaduro* (There is not enough ginger to make a suppository for an elephant). The proverb serves well when someone leans on you with too many expectations: the friend who asks you to find them a school abroad, a scholarship to go with it, and a personal statement thrown in for good measure.

To such persons, perhaps the only just response is ginger paste applied somewhere to cure them of their sense of entitlement. For love, you see, makes requests. It doesn't issue commands. The one who truly loves you does not force the hand, nor scorch the spirit into obedience. Instead, love kneels, asks, and waits for a willing answer.

6. Love thrives on obstacles (aya)

There is an old truth, plain but often overlooked: every love worth its salt will face its storms. The modern mind, so fond of instant pleasure, would prefer love to be a smooth road, swept of dust and paved with pleasures. But real love is no such tame thing. It's more like fire, and fire, like any living thing, thrives on obstacles. If you starve it of challenge, it flickers out. But throw a log in its path, and it leaps higher.

It's a beautiful paradox: the love that endures trials often grows deeper, firmer, more rooted. There is a name for it: the *Romeo and Juliet effect*. A couple who has faced trouble together is more likely to weather future storms. But if a relationship begins with endless sunshine and only meets its first cloud in later years, those rains may come as a flood. Adversity, if embraced wisely, has a way of welding two hearts together.

This truth is echoed in nature. Let us consider two plants: *sensam* and *aya*. The *sensam* (*Aframomum melegueta*) sprawls across the forest floor with little ambition to climb. Its seeds burn with heat on the tongue, and its leaves and roots have long been cherished for their healing powers: fever, constipation, and other ills bow before it. It is undoubtedly useful, but its journey is humble.

Then comes the *aya*, a type of fern (*Matteuccia*), older than most living things, quiet and unassuming, yet astonishing in its hardiness. *Aya* can grow almost anywhere: shaded groves, sunlit stones, soggy earth, or dry ledges. It clings to life in all its forms as a fellow traveller. The *aya* is an *epiphyte*; it doesn't rob

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from its host but coexists, drawing strength from light, air, and its own inner stores.

The *aya* is so esteemed among the Akans that it is an *Adinkra* symbol and can be seen printed on cloth as a badge of endurance. To wear it is to say, “I have weathered storms, and I remain.” Nursing mothers use its leaves to prepare a healing soup.

Both *sensam* and *aya* tend to grow on the palm tree. The *sensam*, lively and early, rushes to cover the tree’s base. But in the end, it is the *aya*, despite the early obstacles, that ascends. It climbs the trunk, curls into the crevices, and settles among the fronds. Thus, the proverb: *Sensam sam abetene ase kwa, aya na ayeforɔ wɔ no* (In vain, the *sensam* gathers at the palm tree’s base, for the fern is the palm’s true wife).

This proverb is no idle poetry. The *aya* may not get a head start, but it ultimately wins. It even outlives the palm. When the palm has served its purpose, when the wine has been tapped and its body left to rot, then, still, the *aya* remains. Unlike parasitic vines that die with their host, the *aya* carries on. Another proverb tells us: *Abe beko a, ne aya na ekoro, nanso abe beko wuo a, wu gya aya* (Wherever the palm tree goes, the fern follows; but when it dies, it leaves the fern behind). A truth tucked in there: women tend to outlive men.

And so, a gentle admonition. If you would love wisely, you must think of more than the present moment. You should secure your family’s future, perhaps through something as practical as life insurance. But more than that, you must ensure your partner isn’t left in dependence. Like the *aya*, your partner should flourish beyond you.

Love, when it is true, doesn’t seek ease. It seeks growth. It doesn’t smother with possession. It strengthens through adversity. It doesn’t fear the storm. It thrives in it.

7. The dog in the manger (bese)

In 1701, the Asante waged war for their liberty and triumphed over Denkyira at the Battle of Feyiase. Among the spoils of war was the captured Denkyirahene, Ntim Gyakari. As legend tells, a red kola nut slipped from his pocket as he fell. Upon seeing it, the mystic Okomfo Anokye chewed a white kola nut and spat upon the red one. That humble nut, so treated, didn't rot in the dust. It sprang into life and became a tree.

That tree still stands today (I visited it in March 2023, more than three centuries after it was planted). Curiously, it bore both red and white kola nuts: a botanical union of the fallen and the blessed. When a recent road expansion threatened its life, the project was diverted. But now, though still standing, the tree bears no fruit. A relic of glory and judgement, no longer productive, and yet not without its tale.

One might ask why these men, in the thick of battle, carried kola nuts at all. But the answer is simple and rooted in ancient practice. The kola nut possesses stimulating properties – caffeine and theobromine – that sharpen one's endurance and dull one's hunger. Warriors chewed them before battle. Mourners chewed them through the long hours of grief. Their initial bitterness gives way to a sweetness that lingers. And to those who drink from bitter wells, the kola nut can lend even water a forgiving taste.

In the Akan language, to say someone is feasting on kola nuts (*abesewee*) is to speak of grief. Food becomes inappropriate. The nut's pale seed covering can be peeled after fermentation and stored for later use. Long before Coca-Cola

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claimed to bottle happiness with synthetic flavours, Africans knew the true worth of the kola nut. As the great Chinua Achebe observed, “He who brings kola, brings life.”

The nut itself grows in forested areas and is known by the name *bese* in Twi. There are three principal varieties: *bese hene* (white kola), *bese-kyem* (red kola), and *bese-torɔ* (false kola). Though similar in appearance, *bese-torɔ* lacks the quality of the actual nuts. Yet some unscrupulous traders mix it in and sell it off to the unsuspecting. But the Akans have a word for such deceit: *Obi nkɔte bese kyem mfra besetorɔ nkɔtɔn mma ne manni* (One must not mix red kola with false kola and sell it to one’s neighbours. There is a moral here about integrity, especially in dealings with those among whom you live.



Kola nuts in a shell

Nature, it seems, has also made provision for the kola tree’s defence. The kola weevil and the larva of *Characoma*, a moth, are chief among its enemies. But their menace is checked by the *nhohoa*, red ants with a sting like heated iron and a strange, sour scent. These ants don’t eat the kola nut, nor do they sell it. But they defend the tree with admirable resolve. In exchange, they take nectar from the plant and shelter in its hollow thorns.

If you have ever tried to climb such a tree, you’ll have met the fury of the *nhohoa*. You would be hard-pressed to forget them. They’re not interested in the fruit themselves, yet they’ll not suffer another to harvest it. Thus, the Akans observe: *Nhohoa a stare bese ho: worentɛ nwe, worentɛ ntɔn; nanso woremma obi mmɛte* (Red ants cling to a bunch of kola; they neither eat nor sell, yet they allow no one else to harvest). It is the ancient Akan version of the old Aesop fable,

“The Dog in the Manger.” The dog can’t eat hay, but it also won’t allow the horse to do so.

If you’re a Ghanaian, you may, at this point, recall the idiom, *Konongo Kaya*. I once thought of it myself in the same breath. But a thoughtful piece by Asamoah Amponsah, a native of Konongo, changed my mind. The phrase “*Konongo Kaya*” *has been misused too often*, applied as if it meant petty obstruction. But the true story is nobler.

Konongo, during the colonial era, was a significant gold-mining town. But it was also divided, like so many towns of the time, between the privileged and the rest. The mines were a world unto themselves, inhabited by Europeans and lit by electric light, while the rest of Konongo remained in darkness. Even the clinic belonged to the mines, and access to healthcare depended on proximity and class.

Socrates, in Plato’s *Republic*, remarked that every city is truly two cities – one of the rich, one of the poor – and that they are perpetually at odds. In Konongo, the division was not hypothetical.

The *Kaya*, labourers hired to carry goods, knew their worth. They formed a silent union of conscience. If one of them named a price, and the (affluent) customer refused, none would accept less. If you would not pay the fair price, then carry your burden yourself. This was not the sulking of a spoiled child. It was a protest, a stand for justice and dignity. The *Konongo Kaya* was no dog in the manger. He was, in truth, a freedom fighter.

8. The pain of ingratitude (bedε)

In days not so long past, though they now feel like another age entirely, you never went to the farm empty-handed. You needed two things: a *toa* (a gourd filled with water to quench your thirst) and a *kenten* (a basket to carry your harvest homeward). The basket, carried on your head, might carry cassava, yam, firewood, mushrooms, and *prekese*.

If you went alone, a tree stump was your silent ally. You would rest your basket upon it before loading, allowing you to lift the load onto your head with relative ease. And so, the Akans warn: *Wotu w'afuom nnunsini nyinaa, wohwere wo soafo* (If you uproot all the tree stumps on your farm, you lose your carrier). The lesson is: don't despise the humble supports in your life, for in a moment of need, they may be the very means by which you rise.

Sometimes, you leave home without a basket, with no intentions of returning with food. But the forest is a generous host. You might stumble upon snails or even a tortoise. You make a crude basket to carry your booty. Once, according to legend, a man even happened upon treasure. After the fall of Asumegya, a loyal subject chanced upon the state's heirlooms in the bushes. He had no basket, so he cut palm fronds in half and wove them together into a makeshift carrier (*bedε*), which he used to carry the gold to the Asantehene.

Now, it was forbidden to carry a *bedε* into Kumasi. Instead, you were to leave it at the town's edge, where the contents could be transferred into a proper basket. But when that man arrived bearing gold, the people said, *Bedε mma Kumasi a, nye Asomasi bedε* (When we say a palm-leaf basket must not enter

Kumasi, we don't mean So-and-so's palm-leaf basket). Even rules must sometimes bow to grace. There is, in every society, an exception that proves the rule.

Yet here lies the sorrow. The *bede*, for all its usefulness, for all its heroism in the hour of need, is soon discarded. Once its load is safely delivered, it is flung upon the midden heap, *suminaso*, where all things unwanted go. As the proverb says: *Bede ayeyie ne sumina so* (The palm-leaf carrier's reward is to be thrown on the rubbish heap). The saying is about helpers who, after carrying us through hardship, are forgotten when we arrive in comfort.

The *suminaso* is an unpleasant place. It is the symbolic grave of gratitude. In many popular Ghanaian songs – Obouba J. A. Adofo's "*Mayeyie Ne Suminaso*", Nana Ampadu's "*Suminaso Ntonko*," and Yaw Sarpong's "*Suminaso*" – artists give voice to this ache. They sing for all that is useful in its season and unwanted thereafter. In Twi, even the phrase *m'ano hwe suminaso* (my mouth points to the midden) is a way of warding off bad luck.

What is it in us that so easily forgets? We remember the one favour denied and erase the hundred generously given. Psychologists might speak of "negativity bias," but the old wisdom already knew this tendency well. We are quick to forget our *bedes*, those makeshift miracles that bore us through. We cut down our *dunsini*, the stumps that once steadied our burdens. In doing so, we sever ourselves from the very means by which we were helped.

Gratitude is a matter of memory and justice. It is how we acknowledge what we have received and from whom we have received it. If you have come far, think of those who helped carry your load. Thank the *bedes* and the *dunsinis*, the humble things and humbler people, without whom you might never have made it home.

9. Don't harm your support system (furuntum)

Among the many teachers that nature offers us is a tree known in Twi as *furuntum*, or sometimes *powee*. Botanists call it *Funtumia elastica*, a name that echoes its Twi one, as science itself bowed briefly to indigenous wisdom. This tree gives forth a milky latex, called *aman*, which dries into a firm and sticky substance. As kids in the village, we used it to fashion rubber balls. The method of making these *aman* balls is almost a rite of passage, though difficult to explain to one who has never wandered bare-footed through bush paths.

Much like the palm-wine tapper, there exists a rubber tapper – skilled in drawing sap from the tree, sometimes enhancing its stickiness with leaves or bark from other plants. This sap, potent in its grip, is not just child's play. It is used to trap birds, particularly the *akyenkyena* (the allied hornbill). During the dry season, these birds descend to the ground for dust baths, often perching on branches placed low by design. A hunter, knowing their habits, will coat a palm frond in rubber and leave it as bait. The bird, seeking rest, finds captivity. Even flies fall into the same sticky fate.

But there is another tale the *furuntum* tree tells. You see, there is a climbing plant called *mmatatwene* (*Cercertis afzelii*) that often wraps itself around the *furuntum*. It climbs out of need. It cannot grow tall on its own, and so it seeks support. The *furuntum* offers this, without asking. Yet the relationship is tragically lopsided. The *mmatatwene*, in its rising, wounds the very tree it clings to. It scrapes, it strangles, it weighs down the branches and exposes them to foragers. The very act of dependence becomes an act of destruction. In time, the

furuntum dies, and when it does, the *mmatatwene*, having lost its host, withers as well.

The Akans don't let such observations pass unnoticed. They crystallise it in a proverb: *Furuntum wuo sae mmatatwene* (The death of the *furuntum* affects the *mmatatwene*). It is as if to say, when the one who supports you falls, you will not long remain standing either. It is a truth so simple it should not need saying. And yet, we continue to act like the *mmatatwene*, strangling the very hands that lift us.

Rex Gyamfi put it to music: *Furuntum be wuo, na mmatatwene nso be wuo*. Perhaps now, if you hear the song again, it will strike you more deeply. It is not about trees and vines. It is about human relationships, the treacherous way we sometimes wound those we rely on the most.

We see this mystery played out repeatedly: the child who curses the parent who fed him, the employee who undermines the employer who gave her a chance, the friend who resents the one who has always made room for them. We may call it envy, pride, or ingratitude. Whatever name we give it, the outcome is the same. Like the *mmatatwene*, we don't just cause the ruin of another but, in the end, our own as well.

To destroy your support is wrong and foolish. One might as well saw off the branch on which one sits. Dependence, if it is to be healthy, must be humble. It must not resent the hand that gives, nor suffocate the one that sustains.

And so, if there is someone in your life who is your *furuntum* – who holds you up, gives you a place to rise, or makes space for your growth – don't bind them with bitterness. To do so is to hasten their fall. And yours. Nature, in this as in many things, whispers wisdom to those who are willing to listen.

10. Enemy rejoices at your downfall (gyinantwi)

The Greeks gave us a helpful distinction between *envy* and *jealousy*. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, describes envy as the pain we feel at another's good fortune. This pain is sharpened by *who* possesses it, not by what we lack. It is not the *thing* itself that torments us, but the *person* who has it. Jealousy, on the other hand, is possessive; a fear of losing what we love. In envy, the rival is the focus; in jealousy, the beloved.

Suppose your friend Ben owns a fine car. Envy rises because *Ben* has a car, not because you need a car. Should he lose it, your resentment eases, even if the car goes to someone else. Ben's misfortune is your relief. Jealousy, in contrast, centres on what or whom we love. If your spouse gives Ben too much attention, you feel jealous. If that attention turns to Tom, the jealousy remains. The object of desire has not changed.

This moral shading is not limited to philosophical texts; it is deeply embedded in the proverbs of the Akans, who understood human nature long before psychology arrived with its terminology. Consider the proverb: *Dee fofo pe ne se gyinantwi abo bidie* (*Fofo* only loves to see *gyinantwi* withered). At first glance, it appears to be a tale of plants. But as is so often the case, the forest teaches more than just botany.

Before the 1970s, when the invasive *acheampong* (*Chromolaena odorata*) swept through Ghana like a conquering general, two plants, *fofo* (*Aspilia latifolia*) and *gyinantwi* (*Didens pilosa*), competed for the sunlit clearings of the forest edge. The *fofo* is the elder and the healer: a perennial shrub, generous in its

gifts to traditional medicine. Its leaves aided childbirth, soothed stomachs, sharpened sight, and stopped bleeding. Dependable, the *fofo* remains through seasons, generations.

Gyinantwi, by contrast, is a fleeting star: fast-growing, briefly brilliant, and then gone. An annual plant with small white flowers and clinging seeds, it quickly springs up and takes over open spaces. But come dry season, it withers. The *fofo*, with its deep roots and enduring nature, then stretches out once more to claim the light. The *fofo*'s hope, as the proverb puts it, is to see *gyinantwi* fade.

This, the proverb tells us, is envy in its purest form; longing to see the rival fail. *Fofa* doesn't necessarily wish for more space or better soil; it simply yearns for *gyinantwi* to perish. The emotional energy is not directed toward growth but toward the rival. One is reminded of football fans who cheer when their rivals falter. If Manchester United's star player limps off the pitch, many a Liverpool fan will smile.

No wonder *fofo* serves as an Adinkra symbol for envy. The message is universal, ancient, and undimmed by time. Envy corrodes whole communities. It poisons friendships, divides families, and stunts personal growth. It turns our focus away from what we ought to become and fastens it instead on whom we hope to see fall.

Yet how often we find ourselves hoping, if not for disaster, then at least for decline in those whose light seems to outshine ours. It is a poor substitute for virtue. Envy is a downward glance, never a forward one. It cares nothing for goodness, only for comparative advantage. It does not climb; it crouches, waiting for others to fall.

What might we become if, instead of hoping to see *gyinantwi* wither, we grew our own roots deeper, sought out our own sun, and gave thanks for all plants? In the forest of life, it is not competition but coexistence that sustains the ecosystem.

Beware, then, the *fofo* in your heart. It may seem harmless, even justified. But the soul made bitter by envy gains nothing in the end, except a front-row seat to another's pain, and a garden left barren by its own neglected growth.

Section B: Community Dynamics and Unity

In this part, we explore proverbs related to unity and community. We cover ideas such as how one troublemaker can mess up a whole community's harmony and the thought that real strength comes from unity. This theme is central to Akan collectivism.

11. One bad person can ruin a community (abɛ)

At school sports events across Ghana, one often hears youths chant a curious song: *Let the cocoa tree die instead of the palm*. To the casual observer, it seems the foolish ravings of wine-loving children, blinded by the fleeting joy of intoxication. After all, *Theobroma cacao*, our valued cocoa tree, has long helped shape Ghana's economy. Why wish it ill?

But these things are rarely so simple. Folklore, like parables, often wraps truth in what appears to be nonsense. We should resist the urge to dismiss such chants too quickly. It may be that the youth, in their playful mischief, intuit something we forget as adults: the palm tree is woven far more deeply into the fabric of everyday life than we often acknowledge.

There are many varieties of palm in Ghana. The *abɛpa*, with its vivid red fruit, is the most common. Its nuts are thick-shelled, and the kernels are rich in oil. There is the *abedɔm*, whose wine is so potent that elders warn the enslaved shouldn't taste it, lest they forget their place and speak out of turn. Then there is the rare *abɛ-si-abɛm* ("a palm seed upon a palm seed"). There is *abetuntum*, dark and strong, and the *abobɔbɛ*, whose thin shells are easily cracked. Each one carries a unique virtue.

Every part of the palm has its use. The fruit, called *abɛfua*, grows in tight clusters (*betim*), and from its flesh we extract palm oil: rich in *beta-carotene*, deep in colour, nourishing and versatile. The kernel (*abedwoa*) yields *adwe-ngo*, a palm kernel oil valued in cooking, soap-making, and even first aid. The shells of the

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young nuts are not so hard to break, and the kernels at this stage are white, soft and edible, tasting like coconut. They are called *akyenkyen*. Ripe nuts make *abenkwan*, a soup so prized that it is rarely served to strangers. Hence the saying, *Ohohoo nni abenkwan* (A stranger does not eat palm-nut soup). Hospitality has its limits. To be Biblical, we don't take the children's food and throw it to the dogs (Matthew 15:26).

The tree's utility doesn't end in the kitchen. Its branches become baskets and fish traps, its fronds become brooms and roofing, and its coarse fibre (*nmewa*) makes fishing lines and snares. The veins of the leaves, once stripped and tied, form the humble broom. A single stalk may break, but bound together, they hold firm. It is no wonder that the bundled broom became a symbol of unity in Akan thought. Even the tender fronds, *merekensono*, played their role in diplomacy and medicine. They adorned envoys and marked the houses of the sick. In peace and plague alike, the palm tree stood as a sentinel.



A bunch of palm fruit

When the palm tree grows too tall (*abetene*) for fruit harvesting, it is not discarded but celebrated anew. It allows for the extraction of *nsafufuo* (palm wine). After the tree is uprooted, incisions are made in the trunk, and the sap is

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collected in *aketekyiwa* (palm wine pots) through *doroben* (*Olyra latifolia*). Fire is then applied to the incision daily to stimulate sap flow, and a fresh cut is added. The palm wine collected in the first few days (*ntunkum*) tends to have low alcoholic content.

The business of tapping palm wine is known as *abetwa*. The *nsafufuo* can be distilled into a more potent alcoholic drink (*akpeteshie*) by pouring palm wine from many sources into a container and then setting a fire underneath. The place where distillation occurs is known as *nsadwaase*, and people gather there to drink from calabashes.

But not all palm wine is good. Occasionally, one tree produces a sour sap, and when its wine is mixed with others, the whole batch is ruined. So, the elders warn: *Abe baako na esee mme-duasa nsa* (Just one palm tree's wine can spoil the wine of thirty). It is a vivid, earthy metaphor for a moral truth: one bad person can ruin an entire community.

This is no idle proverb. Contemporary psychology refers to “social contagion,” the spread of behaviours, attitudes, and moods from one person to another, much like a virus. Gossip, cynicism, bitterness – these don't remain contained. They ripple outward. A single cynic in a workplace, a single scorner in a household, may infect the culture of the whole. Just as a sour palm tree can spoil many pots of wine, so can one corrupted soul turn sweetness to rot.

The English have their version: *One bad apple spoils the barrel*. The Greeks and Romans warned of the same. The danger is not simply in the badness itself, but in its influence. The rot spreads. So does the wine.

Even the beetles know how intoxicating palm wine can be. *Asmordwe*, the palm beetles, are drawn to the sap. They gorge themselves, grow sluggish and are easily caught. To call someone a palm beetle is to suggest they have drunk too much, lost their sense. And yet, even here, the palm tree gives: the dead trunk, drained of sap, becomes host to edible mushrooms (*dommo*). Its final act is one of nourishment.

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that if both the palm and the cocoa tree were to vanish from Ghana, it is the loss of the palm that would be felt most keenly. Cocoa may bring us wealth; the palm tree sustains our lives. It is in our food, our shelter, our tools, our celebrations, and even our deaths. It seems to whisper that usefulness need not be glamorous and that greatness may lie in what is indispensable.

So perhaps those schoolchildren, in their spirited chants, understand something vital. They don't sing in ignorance. They sing with instinct. They know, as their ancestors did, that the palm tree is no mere source of wine. It is the back-

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bone of the community. And like any community, its strength can be undone by a single fault.

So, we should guard against the sourness that spreads. Whether in word, deed or attitude, we each contribute to the wine our communities drink. Let it be sweet, like the *ntumkum*.

12. Never assume – always ask (adɔbɛ)

The raffia palm, known in Akan as *adɔbɛ* or *tonton*, resembles the oil palm at a glance, but only a little, and even then, only to the inattentive. While the oil palm bears a stout trunk and long, feathered leaves with fruit placed just beneath them, the raffia grows taller and thinner, with great fan-shaped leaves crowning its summit. The raffia doesn't yield fruit in the same way, and we don't grow it for that purpose. Instead, it is the leaves and fibres that command our attention, for these are the palm's true gifts. Indeed, its fronds are the longest known to man, reaching as much as twenty-five metres in length.

The raffia palm flowers only once, and then it dies. Botanists call such plants *monocarpic*. Though it lives but once in that respect, the raffia's usefulness is manifold. Its branches serve as beams for building, its leaves shelter our homes as thatch, and its materials furnish us with the means to weave mats, baskets, and brooms. One may even construct walls, ladders, and a mat (*mmerekete*) from its sturdy parts.

There is also palm wine to be had from the raffia, though at a price. One must pierce the base of its terminal bud, its final growing point, and in doing so, hasten the death of the tree. The wine, called *adɔbesa* or *dɔka*, is milder than that from the oil palm, and so people often blend it with the bark and roots of other plants to enhance its potency. Among its uses, it is said to aid nursing mothers in producing milk.

As a boy, I harvested its fronds for play. With the dried stalks, especially the petiole (the segment between the trunk and the leaf), I made birdcages. First, one

strips off the outer layer and uses the soft inner part for the frame. That outer shell, not wasted, becomes the pegs that hold the pieces together. With just this humble material, you could fashion many things. I built elaborate toy houses, complete with upper floors and doors that opened and shut on their own. I made cars too, each a small marvel of design, though they rarely went where I wanted them to.

Scientifically named *Raphia hookeri*, the raffia palm thrives in swampy lowlands and along rivers. It takes its time, growing for years before it flowers, bears fruit, and at last dies. Our ancestors saw a lesson in this and put it into a proverb: *Adɔbe, gyae abubuo bɔ na bisa betene se eyee den na ɔyee tenten* (Raffia palm, stop grumbling and ask the tall oil palm how it managed to grow so tall). Though the raffia bears some resemblance to the oil palm, it doesn't reach the same height, nor does it have the same fruit. It should not sulk, but inquire. Let it learn from those who have succeeded.

There is yet another proverb, this one involving a bird. The hornbill, or *nwam*, eats the fruit of the raffia palm whole. This might seem absurd until one knows that the hornbill has a huge anus, allowing it to pass the fruit. Hence the proverb: *Onwam nim ne to nti na mene adɔbe aba* (The hornbill knows the size of its bottom, which is why it swallows the raffia fruit). It is a saying for anyone who takes on a task that others think is too great. What looks foolish may in fact be wisdom, for the one acting may know something we don't.

And this brings us to the heart of the matter: never assume; always ask. If the raffia would grow tall, let it inquire of the palm. If we see a man swallow a difficult task, let us ask why, not mock him. Behind every action is a reason, often hidden. To presume is easy, but truth lives with the one who asks.

13. A positive attitude is rewarded (atadwe)

The tiger nut, known in Twi as *atadwe* and botanically as *Cyperus esculentus*, enjoys fame across Ghana. It is a common sight on streets, particularly in towns and cities, where vendors display them in small plastic bags. Yet nowhere is this nut more at home than in the Kwahu area, its unofficial capital. And although it has been praised for its health benefits, it is telling that when the word 'atadwe' is mentioned, many Ghanaians don't think first of nutrition. Rather, they smile knowingly, or blush, as if someone had whispered a scandal. For reasons not entirely weird, the name conjures up thoughts that might, some nine months later, be linked with the phrase: "It's your turn to change the baby's nappy."

The tiger nut is propagated by its edible tubers and grows in clumps, with its thin, grass-like leaves bending gently in the wind. It thrives in fresh, clay-rich soils. Beneath the surface, its underground stems yield small, round nuts in hues of brown, black or yellow. These can be eaten raw, cooked, or dried and ground into a nourishing powder.

When eaten raw, tiger nuts offer a pleasant, almond-like flavour. This sweetness is celebrated in a proverb that says: *Enni baabiara a wotena we atadwe a, enye de* (There is no place where chewing tiger nuts is not sweet). It is a charming way of reminding us that good things remain good, regardless of where we find ourselves. Whether in comfort or hardship, pleasantness often lies in the thing itself.

Unusually, the nuts remain viable long after they are dried. They retain their ability to sprout for years, a trait that makes them both enduring and, in the

wrong setting, invasive. Mice, curiously enough, love them too. In hoarding them, they inadvertently help the plant to spread. In parts of Europe, tiger nuts are treated as troublesome weeds. Yet in Spain, where the Arabs brought them in the eighth century, they are treasured. From them, the Spaniards craft *Horchata de Chufa*, a cool, creamy drink enjoyed for centuries.

In Ghana, tiger nuts have found numerous applications. They are made into alcoholic beverages, ground into porridge, and even consumed for the milky juice that bursts from the raw nut, a fluid spoken of, with some reverence, as an aphrodisiac. This particular property has not gone unnoticed in local culture. There are songs about it. Even those advanced in years, whose teeth no longer permit easy chewing, are known to store them away. Another proverb captures this: *Aberewa a nnini se no, n'atadwe gu ne kotokum* (When an old woman cannot chew, her tiger nuts go into her pocket). You might accuse her of being a dog in the manger, but that would be unfair. She has, perhaps, decided that there are some things worth keeping close, just in case.

The tiger nut, for all its sensual reputation, is much more than a natural stimulant. It is rich in antioxidants that shield the body from the effects of ageing and disease, including heart ailments and cancer. It is also known to aid digestion, relieve flatulence, and stimulate urination and menstruation. In traditional medicine, its tubers have been used to treat colic, diarrhoea, indigestion, and even excessive thirst.

The beauty of the tiger nut is that it does not require you to understand its virtues before bestowing them. If it is the aphrodisiac rumour that draws you to it, then so be it. Chew away. The other benefits will come along silently, doing their work without fuss or fanfare. But moderation, as always, is wise. As the French philosopher Montaigne once warned, there is a certain bodily member that may “thrust itself forward too inopportunistly when you do not want it to.” You don’t want to “arm” this bodily member, lest it embarrasses you in public.

14. Don't play with serious matters (atε)

In 2009, while serving as Regional Manager of an insurance company in Ghana, I found myself in a negotiation I have never quite forgotten. It concerned a motor insurance claim involving a tragic accident. The victim, a nine-year-old girl, had suffered injuries so severe that both her legs were amputated above the knee. The photographs alone were unviewable. I remember them still; they're seared into memory.

The lawyer representing the girl was convinced, and quite rightly, that such an injury deserved a substantial settlement. But I knew my company couldn't offer what he sought. Motor premiums at the time were painfully low, and our offer amounted to just a tenth of his demand. I knew, deep down, that the figure verged on insult.

I went to see him in person. The lawyer, the late Mr F. C. Kharsa, was of Lebanese descent, and I began, as was natural, in English. But when, at last, I gave him our offer, he straightened himself, looked me full in the face and said in flawless Twi: “*Manager, deε woreka yi deε, aye se deε woreto nte bi sei!*” That is to say, “Manager, what you're saying sounds like you are playing a game of marbles.” He didn't raise his voice, but the rebuke was clear. Imagine my astonishment that he could speak Twi confidently. I quickly switched to Twi. We both understood that the time for play was over.

Let us, for a moment, consider this game he referenced.

Atε is the Twi name for *Dioclea reflexa*, a climbing plant with compound leaves and clusters of large purple flowers. It bears short, broad pods covered in

soft brown hairs. Inside these pods are two or three large, round seeds. These are the marbles used in the *ate* game.

The game itself is quite straightforward. Players take turns flicking their dried seeds with their fingers into a raised ring, attempting to knock out their opponents' marbles. The victor is the one whose seed remains while others fall. It was customary to affix a small patch of bitumen to one side of the seed to ensure it spun properly. When one's seed struck another with precision, the sound it made – *pa!* – was deeply satisfying. But this was no gentle pastime. Tempers flared. Friends forgot they were friends. Even brothers became rivals. I never saw girls play it, and I, myself, found it too competitive to enjoy. It was war!

As with all contests, not everyone played fairly. Some modified their seeds to make them heavier. They bored tiny holes into the marbles, removed the core, and filled them with bitumen or even concrete. These tampered seeds were known as *atekubu*. If discovered, they were destroyed immediately, and the seeds won through cheating were seized. The rule was absolute: *Atekubu, yenne no nni* (Altered seeds are barred).

There is a proverb which says: *Nye nteto ase na yebu abusua* (It is not at the marble ring that we remember we are family). The lesson is clear. Serious relationships are not preserved during competition. There are places and times for play. And there are moments when play becomes folly.

It would be remiss not to mention the cousin of the *ate* seed, used in the game of *Oware*. The *oware-aba* comes from *Caesalpinia crista*, a scrambling shrub armed with prickles. It, too, produces seeds, though smaller, smoother and grey. The game of *Oware* is altogether more refined (my "Uncle" Kwame Kyei-Baffour disagrees, though). If *ate* is a street brawl, *oware* is a duel between philosophers.

As for Mr Kharsa, we never reached an agreement. I referred the matter to Head Office and left the company shortly after to pursue other interests. To this day, I don't know how the case was resolved. Yet the memory of our offer haunts me still. It felt, even then, like making light of a very grave thing.

But that is a reflection for another time.

15. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth (gyama)

To clear the forest, even a secondary one, is no small task. It requires strength, persistence and, above all, carefulness. However cautious you are, you will almost certainly end up with scratches or stings. Forests are neither tame nor polite. They hide thorns as well as teeth, and danger often comes veiled in green.

One plant, in particular, stands out: *nwere*, a scrambling shrub whose prickles are famous for their tenacity. Among the Ewe, it is known as *damalia*, which means that even snakes fear to climb it. And if a snake turns back, shouldn't we take heed?

The only way to handle *nwere* without getting hurt, they say, is with your lips – *Wode w'ano dɔ nwere a, ebi nwo wo*. That is to say, if your only tool is gentleness, you may avoid its wrath. But gentleness has its limits. More commonly, we turn to a simple and trusted tool: *kɛtɛkorɔ*, a hooked stick used to stabilise the shrub while cutting. It doesn't guarantee immunity from the thorns, but it gives you a fighting chance.

There is a saying, as wise as it is plain: *Wode wonsa bete apem ne-adu na yetwa kɛtɛkorɔ ma wo a, wonse se 'eye tia'* (If you are about to remove a hornet's nest with your bare hand and someone offers you a hooked stick, you do not complain that it is short). In other words, don't turn your nose up at help, however modest it may appear. It reminds us of that old English advice: don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Still, even the *kɛtɛkorɔ* has its risks. Its very length, meant to keep danger at bay, can accidentally stir what was best left untouched. Suppose, in your eager-

ness, you strike the hornets' nest. Will the hornets attack the stick? Of course not. They come for you. And thus, we have another saying: *Mmaborɔ mmɔ kɔɔkɔɔ* (The hornets do not sting the hooked stick). It is a lesson in accountability. The tool may act, but the wielder bears the consequence. The same is true in society. A minister may err, but it is the president who will be called to answer. Delegation may extend one's reach, but not one's innocence.

Now, the best-hooked sticks come from the *gyama*, known in English as the Christmas bush (*Alchornea cordifolia*). It is a loose, wandering sort of plant, with many pliant branches and a red fruit beloved by birds. Hunters know it well, for where birds linger, so too does opportunity.

Yet *gyama* serves more than birds. Its young leaves and inner roots are ground with *hyire* (white clay) and peppers, mixed with water, and used as an enema to prevent miscarriage. Useful, medicinal and yielding, it is an ideal plant from which to cut a *kɔɔkɔɔ*. So, the proverb goes: *W'aforo gyama asi, dua ben so na worekɔpe kɔɔkɔɔ* (You have climbed and descended the Christmas bush; what other tree are you now searching for a hooked stick from?).

The question is rhetorical, of course. It means: why search elsewhere for what you had right in front of you? It is the old folly of overlooking the good we already possess in pursuit of something imagined to be better. As they say, one does not return from England only to learn English in Nigeria.

The truth is, we are often poor stewards of what we have. We dismiss what is familiar, even if it is useful, and pursue the novel, even if it is hollow. But when we learn to recognise the value of what is already in our grasp, we discover a kind of contentment. And that is no small treasure. After all, a bird in the hand, even if it is a common one, is still better than a dozen singing just out of reach in the thicket.

16. Calling the bluff of the idle boaster (hwedeε)

Words have curious lives. They travel, change clothes, lose meaning, and, at times, become sharpened tools of mischief. Take the word *Ntafoɔ*, now often used derogatorily to refer to people from northern Ghana. But I doubt its origins were ever meant to offend. A common explanation is that Northerners came to the south in pairs, like twins, and so were dubbed *ntaafɔɔ* (twins). That story is tidy, convenient, and, if one stops to consider it, utterly improbable.

A more reliable source is the Twi Dictionary by Johann Christaller in 1881. There, he records that Twi speakers broadly referred to all northerners as *Ntafoɔ*, while reserving *Nta-Fufuo* (white Nta) for those living between the River Daka and Salaga. This suggests that *Nta* was a region rather than a quirk of travel habits. If so, *Ntafoɔ* simply meant *the people of Nta*. And those who press the ‘twin traveller’ theory must persuade us that the *Nta-Fufuo* people alone adopted a peculiar, two-by-two migration style – an idea too thin to hold water.

Still, even if the term began innocently, it ought to be retired once it starts to irritate. When people say they are offended by a label, wisdom and decency both advise us to let it go. I prefer *Serem*, the steppe, where a sea of grass waves in the wind. Among these grasses, few are as infamous as *hwedee*, the elephant grass (*Cenchrus purpureus*).

Of this grass, I speak with the familiarity of old adversaries. I have wrestled it, scythed it, and cursed it on the farm. Common across Ghana, it is a perennial with creeping roots and stalks that rise fifteen feet high. It looks like sugar cane

and behaves like a bamboo army. Indeed, the similarity is not only visual; the Twi word for sugar cane is *ahwedee*. No wonder the names echo each other.

To prepare land for tomato planting, one must first de-stump the grass. That alone is an ordeal. Farmers spend days, sometimes weeks, battling rootstocks that have no wish to yield. In contrast, farmers in Burkina Faso, so I'm told, don't bother with such rituals. Perhaps their land is kinder, or their crops more forgiving.

When elephant grass becomes so thick that it turns a path into a barricade, we call it *nkyekyerε*. In such moments, the path is not just blocked, it is mocked. But let us imagine for a moment that this grass boasts of its abilities. Then one might reply, as the proverb does: *Nkenkyema se nim kwan si a, nɔkɔsi nsamankwan ma yenhwe* (If the elephant grass claims it knows how to block the way, let it try to block the path to the land of the dead and let us see). That is to say, if you are going to boast, make it count. Do something truly remarkable. The dead do not take detours for grass.

There is a paradox here. While Ghanaian farmers would gladly see the last of *hwedee*, their East African counterparts have found a use for it. In the push-pull pest management system, a 'push' crop repels pests from the main crop, while a 'pull' crop draws them away. Elephant grass, for all its stubbornness, is a pull crop par excellence.

In Ghana, however, it finds other uses: fencing, roofing, and feeding animals. So, we have another saying: *Hwedee so bebrebre a, yede no gye ban* (If the elephant grass grows too tall, we use it for a fence). When you grow beyond your measure, people will treat you as they perceive you. Your self-importance may be carved into something entirely functional.

While on the subject of grasses, let me say that my own favourite is the lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*). It may not even have a Twi name, though it deserves one. It grows in neat clumps, pale green and fragrant, and its leaves release a sharp lemon scent when crushed. Boiled in water like tea, it is said to ease fever. In other lands, it becomes perfume. In ours, it is a quiet healer.

So, in the end, grasses, like words, can be both a burden and a blessing. It all depends on how we use them, how we manage their growth, and whether we know when to cut them back.

17. Discouraging harmful things (nsansono)

Some dangers are kind enough to announce themselves. The *nwere* bush, for instance, has thorns that are not at all shy. One glance and you know to keep your distance. But the greater mischief in the world often comes clothed in innocence. That is where the true menace lies. In the forest, two such deceivers are *apea* (cow itch, *Mucuna pruriens*) and *nsansono* (nettle, *Tragia benthamii*).

Apea is a climber, modest in appearance, but its pods are covered with fine, yellowish hairs that the devil himself might have well designed. Once they touch your skin, they deliver an irritation so fierce that even the most composed soul is reduced to frantic scratching. Folk remedies abound for relief: cow dung, goat milk, shea butter. One can almost imagine an evil genius bottling the hairs and releasing them into a parliamentary chamber. If the United Nations ever discovers it, they might well classify it under *Weapons of Mass Irritation*.

Nsansono is no less sneaky. It creeps low and unspectacular, yet a brush with its leaves can make you wish you had walked a different path. The Akans say, *Asem nsansono hye wo a, wotiti* (If an irritating tale reaches you, you will scratch it). That is, if someone provokes you enough, your reaction may betray your better judgement. The nettle, like a well-aimed insult, knows how to find the nerves.

Yet nature, in its strange balance, seldom creates without purpose. *Nsansono* has its medicinal uses. Its root decoction serves as a purgative for children, eases labour pains, and even supports fertility. The leaves treat gonorrhoea, kill tape-

worms, and calm diarrhoea. Is it not amazing how something so troublesome to the skin can be generous to the body?

Still, our ancestors warned us not to cultivate it. *Nsansono-dɔtɔ, yɛnto no pam* (We do not give a stake to a thicket of nettles). The nettle creeps like a yam, yes, but unlike the yam, we refuse to support its growth. It means we don't encourage what is harmful, however useful it might seem in moments of need. There is wisdom in drawing such boundaries.

Fetish priests, of course, think differently. They blend the leaves with eggs and wash with the mixture. Some even spread the plant on the ground as a base for their sacred objects.

There is another proverb whose meaning I am not sure: *Deɛ watɔ nsansono mu awuo, ɔde ntide kɔ asamando* (He whose death was caused by nettles enters the land of the dead in a scratching mood). I suspect this means that certain afflictions follow us even into the grave. That which is embedded deep within the soul cannot be cured by ointment.

The most disturbing tale, however, is how *apea* or *nsansono* were once used as punishment. In days past, children who wet their sleeping mats (*kyɛnkyɛn*, made from the bark cloth tree) were scolded. Well, that is an understatement. Their peers would seize them, roll them in the very mat they had soiled, drag them to the bush, and rub nettle or cow itch into their skin. Water was then poured over them to intensify the sting. They were given mocking names such as *tworobia* or *dwonso-kurobo*.

It was cruelty disguised as correction. And yet, such barbarity was not unique to Ghana. Pliny the Elder, writing in ancient Rome, tells us in his *Natural History* that some parents fed their children cooked mice to cure bedwetting. The past, for all its wisdom, is not innocent.

One must always take care not to nurture what wounds us. The plant may have its virtues, but if its sting outweighs its strength, we must learn to keep our distance. Wisdom is more than the avoidance of pain. It is also about recognising what ought not to be encouraged, no matter how attractive it may appear.

18. Individuality within the collective (ntɔn)

The Akan worldview is one of remarkable intricacy, and you can't help but marvel at its balance of the material and the spiritual, the collective and the individual. The human being, in this view, is a carefully woven arras of body, blood, spirit and soul. They are taken to be distinct realities, each with its origin, its logic, and its obligations.

The body, of course, is our earthly vessel. It walks, it hungers, it decays. It is the house in which the other parts live. But at death, while the house crumbles, its occupants continue their separate journeys.

The blood (*mogya* or *bogya*) comes from the mother and determines your *family*. Each person belongs to an *ntɔn*, a matrilineal clan such as Aduana, Asona or Oyoko (some readers might argue that *ntɔn* is the father side, but I follow Denteh here). You might imagine that in this lineage, the individual is submerged beneath the weight of family and tradition. But not so. Though the clan may stretch across centuries and settlements, each member is distinct and accountable.

You may not marry someone from your own *ntɔn*, even if that person lives in a town you have never seen. The restriction is not geographical but genealogical. The belief is that you share one blood.

The word *ntɔn* itself is of uncertain origin. Denteh suggests it means an arc, something that bends across time. In this sense, it links with words like *nyankontɔn* (rainbow), *anintɔn* (eyebrow), and the plant *ntɔn* (*Pandanus candelabrum*), which also describes a curved form. The plant has a stout, upright

trunk with sharp thorns and long, spiny leaves bent like bows. These leaves are woven into sleeping mats.

From this practice comes the proverb: *Nton wo kete apem a, baako pe so na woda* (The pandanus may have a thousand mats, but you sleep on only one). The meaning is layered. The family may be vast, but you, the individual, live one life. You rest on your own mat.

We have considered body and blood. Next comes the spirit (*sunsum*). Unlike the blood, which is maternal, the spirit comes from the father and is imparted at conception. You may also acquire more spirits through naming or experience. These spirits are mobile. They may desert you in times of fear or sorrow. If you seem lost or unsettled, it may be said: *Wo bo mmoaa adwane* (Your spirits have fled).

When you sleep, your spirit may travel, and its adventures return to you as dreams. And here is the curious part: the dream is considered a moral act. If, in a dream, you commit a crime – say, an affair with another man’s wife – you may be asked to account for it, even though your waking hands were clean.

These spirits are grouped into paternal clans (*ntor* – note the difference in spelling with *nton*), associated with rivers and lakes: Bosomafram (river Afram), Bosomptra (river Pra), Bosomtwe (lake Bosomtwe). When you die, your spirit returns to its source. A father may pass on his spirit to his children. A daughter can’t. Her gift is blood, not spirit. You may marry from your father’s clan, but not your mother’s.

Then there is the soul (*okra*), the deepest mystery of all. It comes from God. It is singular, unlike the spirits, which may be multiple. The soul never wanders. It stays with you throughout life and only departs at death. The *sunsum* exists, in part, to guard the *okra* from evil. If the spirit is absent or weak, the soul becomes vulnerable.

Upon death, the soul lingers. In this state, it is called *sasa*. Finally, it journeys to *asamando*, literally, the land of *sasa*. This is not just the graveyard (*afunsieye*), but a distant, spiritual world. Our ancestors believed that injury to the soul brings illness to the body. Malice from others may harm you inwardly. But the more sobering truth is that your own bitterness, if left unchecked, can distress your soul and make you ill.

To address this, the people of Techiman instituted an annual clearing of the soul: the *apɔ* festival. For one week in a year, you may speak your mind, even to the chief. You may confront, accuse or complain without fear of consequence. The purpose is both licence and healing. The soul, once unburdened, can rest.

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Even the one confronted receives peace, for truth, when spoken in the right spirit, quiets both speaker and hearer.

There is a lesson here for all of us. We are individuals, but not islands. We live in families and clans. We carry blood, spirit and soul, each from a different source, each with its own duty. You are a matrilineal being with a paternal wind and a divine spark. You are many, and yet, you are one.

19. Does a turkey vote for early Xmas (odum)?

Not long after a lesson on moral dilemmas in her Ethics class, my daughter Awurama, who was then eleven, sought to measure the strength of my principles. She asked whether I would divert a runaway trolley to save five lives at the cost of one. If I did nothing, the five would perish, and one would live. I gave the well-worn reply that no person ought to be used as a means to an end, and therefore, I wouldn't touch the lever.

She paused. Then asked, "What if the five people were your children?" I admitted, rather more quietly, that in such a case I would pull the lever without hesitation. With the calm assurance only a child can muster, she responded, "You see, you're not as principled as you think you are." And she was right.

It is easy to adopt the moral high ground when the consequences rest on the shoulders of others. When, however, the matter reaches our own door or our own blood, our principles tend to bend like reeds in the wind. When the stakes are personal, we are quick to swap ivory towers for warm shelters.

Philosophers have long distinguished between ethical, psychological and rational egoism. Yet at their heart, all these ideas acknowledge a simple truth: human beings are rarely strangers to self-interest. It would be mistaken to lay the blame entirely at the feet of Western individualism. Our ancestors, communal though their lives may have been, were aware of the inclinations of the human heart.

Their wisdom is preserved in proverbs such as *Dɔ̀nkɔ̀ nkyerɛ nnanua* (The

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enslaved person does not point out the timber tree). If he did, he would find himself burdened with the felling, the splitting, and the hauling, and all for someone else's gain. Why draw attention to a task that will only add to your misery? In effect, no turkey votes for an early Christmas.

Economists would speak of rational choice theory. That is, we act in ways that preserve or maximise our well-being. Our ancestors arrived at the same insight through fable and forest. Take, for instance, the *odum* tree (*Milicia excelsa*), once common and esteemed in the forest. In days before we had succeeded in denuding our woodlands, the word *timber* would call *odum* to mind. It was the crown jewel of hardwoods, prized for its strength, durability and beauty.

Fire-resistant and weatherproof, it found its way into almost everything: beds, benches, staircases, drums, door frames, coffins and canoes. Its heartwood is golden brown or green-tinged, seasoned without shrinking. It stood tall, often unbranched for twenty metres, with no buttress roots to weaken the stem. Its bark could be used for roofing; its leaves served as sandpaper. Even the insects, it seemed, held *odum* in reverence, for termites avoided it altogether.

And yet its virtues did not end in carpentry. The bark relieved inflammation and fatigue, aided digestion, eased coughs and diarrhoea, and served as a laxative. Its slightly acidic latex, used on wounds or rotting teeth, had antiseptic and healing properties. A tree of such dignity and breadth, one might say, deserved to be held sacred.

Indeed, it was. Farmers sometimes laid offerings of food beneath it, drawing from the belief that the *odum* tree held spiritual significance. From such practices arose another proverb: *Yerenhunu se dua Dumframe besi kurotia adane bosom agyegye abetem ama abotokura akɔdi adɔre sradee wɔ bere a yenwe ne nam* (We ought not to sit idly by while the mighty *odum* tree grows at the edge of the town, only for it to become a fetish that collects food for a striped mouse, which we do not eat).

One does not honour a shrine just for others to grow fat from it. The mouse, unworthy and aloof, becomes the uninvited beneficiary. In this, too, our ancestors remind us that devotion ought not to become exploitation.

And now, the *odum*, once towering, proud and plentiful, is classified as threatened. Perhaps it gave too generously. Maybe we took too greedily. And possibly, in our eagerness to use it for every purpose under the sun, we forgot that even the most generous of resources must be protected if it is to endure.

Some may frown at the notion that self-interest holds such sway. Yet I return

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to the words of my daughter, who saw my soul more clearly than I did. “You’re not as moral and principled as you think you are.” And perhaps that is not such a terrible confession. There is no shame in acknowledging the necessity of self-preservation. You can’t be a blessing to others while perishing oneself. So let us not judge the turkey too harshly. Nor the enslaved person who keeps silent. Nor even the *odum*, who gave so much and may not survive the giving.

20. Your reputation precedes you (prekese)

Should you ever find yourself in Ghana, I urge you to make the journey to Wli Waterfall near Hohoe. The waterfall, the tallest in West Africa, is a spectacle of grandeur. Yet it is not the waterfall itself that lodged most deeply in my memory, but the approach to it.

From the visitor centre at Wli-Agorviefe, a narrow footpath meanders its way through a forest. The sunlight filtering through the canopies plays like gold on the forest floor. Eleven wooden bridges carry you over the Agumatasa River, and if that were not enough, the trees along the way bear plaques with both botanical and local names. That was where I first met the formal name of a fruit I already knew by scent and shape: *Tetrapleura tetraptera*, more familiarly *prekese*.

The botanical name may feel bulky, but the plant is no stranger. It is indigenous, often called the Aidan fruit in English-speaking corners. The fruit is a curious dark-brown pod, long and ridged, with four distinct wings twisted along its body. It smells faintly of caramel, a scent that floats gently from soup pots. Even the fish and crabs seem to find it irresistible, for it is sometimes used as bait in traps. A dash of the pulp in palm wine adds an aromatic depth, while the bark, leaves and roots are often added to wine to strengthen its effect. Pod ash may replace salt or contribute to soap-making.

Its uses, however, are not limited to the kitchen. *Prekese* wears many medicinal hats. The bark is used as an enema for constipation and decocted as a tonic after illness or fatigue. It is administered to induce vomiting or to ease gonorrhoea. Malaria patients bathe in a fruit infusion, and it has long been used to

address ailments such as arthritis, asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, and high blood pressure. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Ghana's president encouraged the nation to turn once more to *prekese* because of its demonstrable health benefits.

Among the Akan, *prekese* also finds a place in the rituals of loss. A widow or widower may be given a charm, *gyabum*, containing *prekese*, leaves of *nunum* (*Ocimum gratissimum*), *emee* (*Ocimum canum*), and a dry, roasted corn cob. These four elements are tied together with raffia. The charm is believed to have the power to expel the lingering spirit of a deceased spouse (*sasa*).

The power of *prekese*, though, lies beyond its use. Its very presence is powerful. A proverb says: *Prekese gyaanadu a wofiti kurotia, na ne ho rebɔn afie mu* (*Prekese*, the assertive one, its scent is so potent that it announces itself from the outskirts of town, long before you see it. The meaning is clear. A person's reputation often arrives before they do.

This is not folklore. In tight-knit rural communities, everyone knows everyone else, and a name can be either a refuge or a shadow. A good reputation, once earned, offers safety. A bad one closes doors long before you knock. City life, by contrast, tempts us with invisibility. One might be a criminal in Nungua and a pastor in Dansoman, and no one would be the wiser. Urban anonymity encourages a form of moral amnesia. It permits duplicity, the freedom to become many different selves in different corners of the same city. One can wear a halo by day and horns by night. And the world, in its busy hurry, may never notice.

This, perhaps, is why modern societies invest so heavily in systems that track reputations. National identity cards, digital records and credit profiles exist as moral reminders. In Germany, you must produce a SHUFA report (financial reputation) before renting a house. The very act of registering your address with the authorities is a brake on mischief.

You may consider such systems impersonal, but they serve a deeply personal end. They whisper truth into the ear of temptation: you're visible. Your actions follow you. The world will know. So yes, your reputation precedes you, like *prekese*, whose scent wafts ahead of its shape. Whether that reputation is sweet or bitter depends on what we have steeped into the lives we live. We should consider how far our influence may reach, even when we are unaware of it. It is a humbling thought. And like many humbling thoughts, it is also true.

Section C: Reflection and Personal Development

In this part, we survey proverbs on learning about yourself and growing personally. The essays explore the challenges of self-reflection and the constant effort to become the best version of yourself. From dealing with impossible wishes to understanding the contradictions that influence our lives, these proverbs encourage us to question what we assume, challenge deep-seated beliefs, and build resilience in tough times.

21. The grapes we can't reach are sour (abia)

There is an old tale told of Thales of Miletus, one of the first philosophers of the Western world. He lived simply, spoke wisely, and dismissed wealth as a distraction. His simplicity, however, didn't impress his critics. They said he spoke ill of riches because he had none himself. It was, in their view, the common defence of the empty-handed.

Thales didn't respond with an argument. He acted. One year, he booked every olive press in Miletus (in present-day Izmir, Turkey), securing exclusive rights before the harvest began. When the season turned out abundant, the presses were in high demand. Thales, now owner of the pressers, charged well for their use and became rich. Then he went back to his frugal ways. In one deft move, he silenced his accusers and proved that he had no love of wealth, only mastery over it.

It's a rare sort of person who can walk away from power once it is in their grip. Most of us, if we are honest, aren't like Thales. We may mock the luxury of the wealthy while we have little, but that scorn often masks something else: envy dressed in virtue. Why should anyone buy a golden watch when there are hungry mouths in the world? It seems a virtuous question. But wait until your own pockets are full. You may still give to the poor, yes, but you might also find yourself browsing for that very same watch.

This isn't to commend indulgence but to highlight an awkward truth about human nature. It is easy to judge from the sidelines. Far harder when the game is yours to play. Our ancestors knew this. They said, *Nea adee wı no na ıdı, na enye*

nea ekɔm de no (It is the one who owns the food who eats it, not the one just driven by hunger). Or again, more vividly: *Abia, ne hyɛ fata ɔseɔ abakɔm, nanso adowa na oni awuo* (The white beads of the *abia* plant would suit the leopard splendidly, but it is the mother of the royal antelope who inherits them).

The *abia* plant (*Merrimia alata*) is a delicate climber, spiralling its way up stronger stems. Its winged vines set it apart from other plants. Its seeds, white and gleaming, could pass for fine beads. You can picture a leopard, that majestic predator, adorned in such bracelets. Yet in the proverb, they belong to the royal antelope's mother. It is an image of misplaced claim, of beauty and privilege, resting where one least expects.

And here lies the twist. The leopard, we imagine, consoles himself with the thought that the beads aren't so lovely after all. That is the shape of our self-deceit. I have known it myself. Years ago, while working in Sunyani in Ghana, the only building with a lift was the Cocoa House. I would climb six flights of stairs, proudly declaring it healthier than using the elevator. One day, a colleague invited me into it. I observed how it worked. Thereafter, I used the lift even to reach the second floor. So much for healthy living!

What changed? Nothing but access. We like to imagine we abstain from certain pleasures because we are virtuous. Sometimes it is just because we've not had the chance. This is where philosophers introduce the idea of *moral luck*, the notion that the morality of our actions is sometimes shaped by circumstances beyond our control. You may think yourself righteous simply because you've never been tempted in the way others have. You may count yourself only because your chance never came to be unjust. The man who has not stolen may only be the man who was never hungry enough.

That is why the Thaleses of this world are so rare. Most of us are good only until tested, until our *release clause* is triggered. You may be saintly now, sharing a room with three siblings. Let us see who you become when you can afford your own flat with no one to watch you. The grapes we can't reach aren't sour. We only say so to quiet the ache of desire. Better to admit that we're often not as noble as we think we are. And then, perhaps, we might begin to grow into something truer.

22. You can't give what you lack (abiribiriwa)

I'm on a short flight from Munich to Amsterdam. The flight attendants are delivering the standard safety announcements. You've heard them too. The one that always stays with me is this: if the cabin loses pressure, oxygen masks will drop from the overhead panel. Place your own mask on first before helping others.

At first glance, this instruction feels counterintuitive. Surely, the virtuous thing is to help your neighbour before yourself? But the science is clear. Without oxygen, you lose consciousness within seconds. If you collapse trying to help someone else, then you have saved no one. You become one more casualty in the attempt to be noble.

This principle applies far beyond the fuselage of an aircraft. Sometimes, caring for yourself is sanity, not selfishness. In fact, it may be the most moral thing you can do. Consider the person who leaves a toxic marriage. From the outside, it might seem like a self-serving act. But what if that decision gives their children a living, functioning parent instead of a shattered one? Staying 'for the children' may sound noble, but it can turn out to be a slow journey to the grave. A dead martyr is no use to anyone.

There are times, then, when it's essential to prioritise yourself. As the proverb says, *Ye'ye abiribiriwa, oibara so ne kye* (We have become like the fruit of the *abiribiriwa* tree; each wears their own hat). In other words, everyone must see to their own head. Our elders spoke in images, and this one is particularly fitting.

The *abiribiriwa* tree (*Lannea acida*) is a sturdy shrub with a dense, round

crown. Its fruits, which hang in proud clusters, look rather like someone sporting a flamboyant hat. Slightly acidic in taste, they can be eaten raw, cooked, or prepared as a drink. This plant, like many things in nature, is far more than ornamental. It provides gum, food, medicine, and firewood. Herbalists have long turned to it for all manner of ailments: from beriberi to bilharzia, epilepsy to herpes, toothache to stomach cramps. The leaves are astringent, the roots potent, the stem a source of edible gum, the fruit oil-rich, the wood soft but useful.

And yet, its usefulness may be its undoing. So valuable is the *abiribiriwa* that herbalists seldom leave it alone. They pick at its bark, dig at its roots, and harvest its fruit. Often, it dies from overuse. A tree cannot be medicine to the world if it is stripped bare.

We are no different. We are not inexhaustible springs of strength, kindness, patience and care. If we pour ourselves out endlessly without replenishment, we too will wither. Modern life often celebrates the self-sacrificing hero; the parent who never rests, the friend who always listens, the worker who never clocks out. Yet these patterns, if unchecked, become slow ways of dying. And then what? What good are we to others when we ourselves are undone?

There is something great in realising that you, too, are a person worth caring for. That your needs are not indulgent distractions, but signs of your finitude. Even Christ withdrew to the wilderness from time to time. Saints had their deserts. Prophets had their caves.

We may think, especially those of us raised in duty-bound cultures, that rest and self-care are signs of weakness. But to live wisely is not to burn ourselves out in service to others. It is to know when to pause, breathe, and recover. Even the lamp must be refilled if it is to keep burning. You can't give what you lack. The oxygen mask lesson, then, is no trivial metaphor. It is a moral insight. If you wish to give love, find some for yourself. If you want to serve others, preserve your strength. If you long to lift others up, stand on solid ground.

As you go about your day putting smiles on faces and easing others' burdens, don't forget that you're someone too. Take care of yourself. You may be someone's lifeline, but only if you're still alive.

23. Passion needs no motivation (dawadawa)

Despite its impressive medicinal credentials, I don't like *dawadawa*. The smell unsettles me. My childhood memories of it are enough to keep me walking past it at the market, no matter how many health experts sing its praises. Yes, I know. It helps with diabetes, diarrhoea, piles, conjunctivitis, coughs, hypertension, even measles and wounds. But still, no thank you.

Dawadawa is a local condiment made from the West African locust bean. Botanically, we know it as *Parkia biglobosa* or *Parkia clappertoniana*, though other species exist. These trees thrive in dry savannahs and open grasslands. The process of turning their beans into food is thorough. First, you remove the husks. Then you boil the kernels until they soften into a pungent paste. You let that ferment for several days, press it into cakes or balls, and finally use it as a spice in soups.

The Akan name for the tree is *ɔɔn* or *sorɔno*; the word *dawadawa* comes from Hausa. Its yellowish pulp is also used in soups, while the leaves, rich in nitrogen, serve as fertiliser. Beyond food, the tree is astonishingly versatile. You can boil and strain the leaves, mix the result with wood ash and cereal flour, ferment it, dry it, pound it, and end up with a completely different kind of sauce. And that's just the start.

The bark and pods can be used to treat diarrhoea or harden the walls and floors of earthen huts. Eye infections? Try the leaf and root infusion. Cattle in labour? Farmers apply *dawadawa* seed paste to nudge things along. Inflammatory ailments, testicle pain, even leprosy – our ancestors had a remedy tucked

somewhere in the *ɔɔn* tree. Its heartwood makes bowls, its bark tans leather, and its flowers serve bees. Even the fibrous root mash becomes a sponge.

And as if to confirm its widespread usefulness, monkeys and baboons are known to love its fruit. It's so irresistible that Akan wisdom declares: *Obi nhyɛ kontromfi mma ɔnni ɔɔn aba* (One does not force the baboon to eat the West African locust bean). It will eat it all on its own. The implication? You don't need to motivate someone to do what they naturally love. Passion needs no prompting.

I write this not because I must but because it brings me joy. No one sets an alarm for me. No one stands behind me with a stick. The baboon doesn't need a pep talk to feast on the *ɔɔn* fruit. In the same way, a person with a real love for something needs no coercion, no morning mantra, no productivity app.

Some are fortunate to earn their keep doing what they love. And while work, even delightful work, can be tiring, it rarely feels like drudgery when you're doing something that speaks to your core. Mark Twain once said, "Find a job you enjoy doing, and you will never have to work a day in your life."

But perhaps our elders put it better, in fewer words. If the baboon loves *ɔɔn*, why try to force it?

That's the secret, isn't it? When love and labour align, motivation becomes unnecessary. We chase what we're drawn to, we return to it again and again, and we make room for it when we're tired. That's the magic of passion. It pulls us forward when nothing else will.

So, if you find something that grips you the way the *ɔɔn* fruit grips the baboon, pay attention. That kind of love is rare. And unlike *dawadawa*, whose scent I may never stomach, it will never be something you need to be talked into.

24. You're far better than you think (gyeene)

Despite rising at dawn for the market, Yaa Dufie returns empty-handed. Sales were poor. The dream of buying fish or meat for dinner is dashed. Gari soakings will have to do. As she resigns herself to her bad luck, the rhythmic thump of a neighbour pounding fufu seeps through the wall. Fufu? While she's about to eat gari? Life is unfair, she sighs.

Just then, a knock. It's Nana Ama, the neighbour's daughter, sent to borrow salt. Curious, Yaa asks after the family. The little girl, ever chatty, says all is well, except her mother's grumbling about having only the head of *amane* (a type of dry fish) for her soup.

As Nana skips off with the salt, Yaa reconsiders her plight. Maybe things aren't so perfect next door after all. At least she has salt and three pieces of *amane*. Suddenly, it doesn't feel so bad. She tells herself: *Wote puupuu a, wo bi di, na ebia na eye amanetire* (When you hear fufu pounding, you too may pound, for the soup might contain only the head of a dry fish).

This proverb warns against envying others based on appearances. What we see is often a highlight reel, carefully curated and polished. Meanwhile, we live with the unfiltered version of ourselves, complete with doubt, failure and fear. No wonder we underestimate ourselves.

Still, Yaa's reaction is understandable. In Ghana, soup is serious business. As Kofi Akpabli wittily noted, we don't ask, "What's for dinner?" but rather, "What soup is doing the backing?" Dinner staples remain constant (banku, fufu, rice), but soup is the true mark of quality. And soup, no matter the variety, needs four

ingredients: salt, pepper, onion and some form of protein. Without fish or meat, it's dismissed as *tuku* soup. But even *tuku* can still taste glorious if seasoned well.

Take salt (*nkyene*). Today, it's a kiosk away, but our ancestors trekked long distances for it, especially to Saltpond (Akyemfo), named by Europeans after the large pond there. A proverb goes: *Kɔ Akyemfo kɔtɔ nkyene bra; nkyene amma, sika nso amma, na wobeka ama no aye de se nkyene* (Go to Saltpond to buy salt; if you return with neither salt nor money, what excuse will taste sweet like salt)? Some failures are just too bitter to explain away.

Next, there's pepper. We don't know which type Yaa had, but it could've been *mesoa*, with its oblong fruits; *makohuam*, with near-round pods; *nsatea*, long and red when ripe; or *ntonko*, the largest and hottest of them all. All have varying degrees of fire and flavour.

The importance of pepper is captured in the proverb: *Ntonko, mesen abe* (The pepper says, "I am greater than the palm nut"). Why? You can make soup without palm nuts, but never without pepper.

Pepper has medicinal uses, too. Leaf juice is squeezed into the eyes to cure headaches or wounds, and the fruits are used in enemas. In some punitive traditions, pepper paste was applied to sensitive areas of errant children. Of course, the culprit suffered the punishment. As another proverb goes, *Kotere nkɔdi mako mma aponkyerene mfiri fifiri* (The lizard doesn't eat hot pepper for the frog to sweat). Everyone faces the consequences of their own actions.

Yaa also had onion (*gyeene* or *sopradaa*). Its place in the Ghanaian kitchen is so vital that it bears the honorary title *Abompam-gyeene* (the ubiquitous onion). The bulbs grow in clusters and are harvested when the hollow leaves wither.

Onion is used in every soup and stew, and in traditional medicine, it's nearly magical. From medieval Europeans warding off plagues with onion garlands to Ghanaians using it to treat colds, coughs, earaches and even tooth decay, *gyeene* earns its place. It has anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial and aphrodisiac properties. Not bad for something that often makes us cry.

So, even without meat, Yaa could still make soup. She had salt, pepper and onion, three of the sacred four. Things weren't as bleak as they had seemed. But isn't that just like us? We obsess over missed opportunities, past friendships, lost loves, and imagined relationships that never blossomed. We compare our unfiltered reality with others' edited lives and convince ourselves that we fall short. We assume others are more competent, successful, or blessed because we see their performance, not their process.

It's not that we're all the same. Some people genuinely excel at what they do, just as we excel at things they might never master. Yet, those with true success

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rarely flaunt it. It is the loud ones, often with dubious sources of wealth or achievement, who pound the proverbial fufu so that everyone hears.

Meanwhile, our own pot may be bubbling with good things: salt, pepper, onion, and yes, even a few pieces of *amane*. That's still soup. That's still dinner. That's still dignity.

So, when the world around you seems to be pounding loudly, take a moment. Listen carefully. What you hear might just be the hollow echo of someone boiling the head of a fish. And what do you have? It might be more than enough.

You're far better than you think.

25. Everyone has a role to play (kakapenpen)

If the world had been designed purely for convenience, it would have made us all the same. Imagine it: people as identical as coins from the same mint. Easier to predict, easier to organise. No arguments, no misunderstandings, no surprises. But what a dreadfully dull place it would be.

Thankfully, the Creator (or the creative force, if you prefer) took a different route. A riskier, more intricate, and far more interesting one. Each person is unlike any other. We differ in our features, temperaments, dreams, and histories. It's not a flaw. It's a design.

If we were all the same, cooperation would be unnecessary. You wouldn't read this, for you would already know what I'm going to say. Trade, friendship, storytelling, even love – they would lose their purpose. Our differences, rather than separating us, connect us.

Everyone has something to offer this world. Not everything, mind you, but something. We tend to rank people's contributions (some high, others low), but such rankings are often fickle and context-bound. Jürgen Klopp, former Liverpool manager, once said in an interview that while he understands football better than most, such a skill would've been entirely useless five hundred years ago. What makes you valuable today might be of no use tomorrow, and vice versa.

So, what does this mean? That no one is beneath dignity. No one is without purpose. Our ancestors captured this truth well in a proverb: *Esono odum, na esono odan, na esono kakapenpen* (*Milicia excelsa* is unique, *Piptadenia africana* is unique, *Rauwolfia vomitoria* is unique).

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These trees couldn't be more different. *Odum* (see page 63) towers above the forest canopy. Its hardwood resists termites, and its bark serves even as roofing. Builders and artisans prize it. *Ɔdan* (see page 147), also tall, is favoured in carpentry, and when it stands in a field, it commands such presence that farmers are warned not to leave their palm nuts exposed. *Ɔdan si afuo so a, wɔnnu abe ngu awaworata* (If *ɔdan* stands in the farm, we do not leave palm nuts in the open). A poetic way of saying: when you have strength nearby, use it.

Then there is *kakapenpen*: small, unimpressive, ignored by carpenters. Its wood is brittle and breaks easily. But to the herbalist, *kakapenpen* is of immense value. Its roots, when steeped in gin and mixed with guinea grains, produce a tonic for men whose manhood has taken a sudden retirement. When wood can't make a bed, and man can't rise from it, one begins to see that usefulness comes in many forms.

Its boiled roots help with jaundice. A mixture of its bark with guinea grains and banana stem juice soothes swellings. You won't find *kakapenpen* in the showrooms of luxury furniture stores, but in a healer's satchel, it holds pride of place.

And so, it is with people. Some build homes, others heal wounds. One leads armies, another raises a child. One writes books, another reads them aloud to the blind. The point is not to be everything. The point is to be something faithfully, fully, and in your own shape.

If you are taller than I am, it means I am also shorter than you. Each is only a perspective away from the other. There is no need to envy the *odum* if you are a *kakapenpen*. They were never made for the same task. And who knows? One day, the storm may come, and the great tree falls, but the little one remains, useful, stubborn, needed.

To be unique is a calling, never a misfortune.

26. Family origins count (kokrosabia)

In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell asks us to reconsider how we understand success. He argues that personality and intelligence, though important, are not the whole story. The time and place into which one is born can make all the difference. He gives the example of the tallest tree in the forest. It didn't become great by strength alone. Rather, it flourished because no other tree shaded it, the soil was rich, no creature gnawed it in its youth, and no axe felled it before its prime.

The Akans have long grasped this truth. Their proverbs teach that the roots of our success are often sunk deep in the soil of parentage and patronage. Consider the proverb, *Okra wɔ piafoɔ a, anka ɔbeyɛ nam asene ɔkraman* (If the cat had a patron, it would become a better hunter than the dog). In the villages, dogs are trained to hunt, while cats are left to fend for themselves against house mice. Scientists may tell us that dogs have more cortical neurons than cats, and they might be right, but one only needs to observe a cat's cunning, its agility, and its climbing skills to see that talent isn't the issue. The trouble is with opportunity. Without training, even the cleverest must make do with lesser tasks.

Now let us turn to a proverb about a plant: *Eserɛ so dua kokrosabia se, enyɛ ogya na ehye no afrinhyia biara a, anka ɔne odupon bi se* (The *Cochlospermum* of the savanna says, if it were not for the fire that burns it every year, it would rival the mighty tree). Every dry season, the savanna grasslands are set ablaze, and so the *kokrosabia* never gets the chance to reach its full stature. This, too, is a lesson. Not every stunted tree is weak by nature. Some have simply been burned too many times.

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Kokrosabia, as it is called in Twi, or *kakalito* in Ewe, bears golden-yellow flowers that brighten the savanna with surprising beauty. Its fruit contains seeds covered in fine, cotton-like hairs, which the wind gladly carries off. These seeds are sometimes strung as beads. The root yields a yellow dye, and the bark provides fibres for rope. Medicinally, its leaves and rhizomes are used for a host of ailments: diabetes, diarrhoea, malaria, jaundice, and more. It is a perennial shrub, capable of reaching greater heights if only the fires would cease.

Here, then, is the point. As with the cat, so with the *kokrosabia*. Success is rarely the product of effort alone. Sometimes, it is simply a matter of fortune; of being spared the fire, of being trained, of being given a fair chance. To forget this is to become proud. We begin to think we are naturally better than others who weren't given the same start.

I grew up in Kuntunso, near Techiman, and our household held a strong sense of fairness. We were six boys, born of four different mothers, but all living with our grandmother. Since our mothers were sisters, we were not cousins, but brothers. We all ate from the same bowl.

Ken, the youngest among us, was the one who would divide the meat. He had to pick last. *Ɔkye-adeɛ ntu bi* (He who shares does not pick first). Because he knew he would be the last to take his portion, he was careful to divide the meat as equally as possible. If he cut it unfairly, he would be the one to suffer the loss. This was our early education in justice and fairness.

Now, imagine a thought experiment. Suppose we all suddenly turned into animals. Let us say that some became cats, others dogs, quite at random. Most importantly, no one could choose what they would become. But before the transformation, we were allowed to agree on how cats and dogs should be treated. What kind of rules would we choose?

Surely, we would do what Ken did: prepare for fairness, knowing that we might well end up on the less fortunate side. This, in essence, is what the American philosopher John Rawls calls the "veil of ignorance." When we don't know what role we shall play in life, the only reasonable rules are those which ensure fairness for all.

So let us remember the *kokrosabia*, singed by fire through no fault of its own. Let us not forget the cat, skilled but untrained. And let us walk humbly, knowing that our flourishing, when it comes, is often the fruit of mercy as much as merit.

27. It is easier said than done (nwerε)

If we are honest – and I believe we ought to be – we must admit that there is often a troubling gap between what we say and what we do. I am sincere when I teach, as I trust many are. Yet, like the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, I find that “what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” Aristotle, that great moral philosopher, says much the same in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII, where he explores the struggle of knowing the good and yet failing to follow it.

Modern science, which occasionally catches up with ancient wisdom, now explains this dilemma in terms of the architecture of the brain. It tells us we possess two broad systems of thinking. The first is fast, automatic and intuitive. The second is slower, deliberate and rational. The intuitive mind governs most of our ordinary actions. We duck when someone hurls a stone; we don’t pause to estimate angles or velocity. We act by instinct.

The reflective side, the one we flatter ourselves with, steps in only occasionally. I like to think I am using it now, as I write these words. It is capable of great reason and insight, but it’s not always in control. For when the moment for action comes, it is often the intuitive part that takes the reins, and it doesn’t always remember what the reflective part said earlier with such clarity.

Take an example. When others mourn, we are quick to offer words of comfort. We say, “God gives, and God takes,” as our elders put it, *Onyame na ɔde ma*. Yet when our own grief comes, we forget that same counsel. We’re not alone in this inconsistency. There are marriage counsellors who live in chaos at home,

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doctors who smoke, statisticians who gamble, and ethicists who are not, themselves, ethical. Even an insurance broker may be uninsured.

This is not hypocrisy. As the lexicographer Samuel Johnson once asked a friend, “Sir, are you so grossly ignorant of human nature as not to know that a man may be sincere in good principles without having good practice?” We may genuinely believe what we say, even when we fail to live by it. In this, our elders caution: *Wode w’ano dɔ nwere a, ebi nwo wo* (You don’t get pricked by the intention to weed thorns).

Nwere (*Acacia pennata*) is a tough, thorny creeper found mostly in secondary forests. Its thorns catch your clothing as you pass. The bark, once stripped of its prickles, is useful for string and for the mats on which cocoa is dried. Medicinally, it is not without value. The white variety is used with pepper as an enema for stomach troubles.

The Ewes call it *damalia*, which means “a snake never climbs it.” The thorns make even the serpent hesitate. You will be pricked, certainly, if you try to clear it. But you will not be pricked if you just *talk* about clearing it. That is the point. Speech is smooth; action is thorny.

The proverb continues. *Enwere ani sa ntomago* (The *Acacia pennata* is always against an old cloth). That is to say, it tears the weak and leaves the strong intact. Life, too, seems to favour the strong and burden the fragile. The same difficulty that brushes past the sturdy may rend the vulnerable.

Now, someone might say, “If you cannot practise what you preach, then do not preach at all.” But that is not quite fair. Since we so often act on intuition, we require others to help us correct our course, even if those others are themselves imperfect. As our elders say, *Dee ɔretwa sa nnim se n’akyi akyea* (He who cuts a path through the bush does not see its crookedness behind him). An observer sees what the path-cutter cannot, and if the cutter is wise, he will listen and adjust.

Let us take this further. Suppose the observer now becomes the path-cutter, and the former cutter steps back to observe. If the new cutter makes a crooked path, and the former cutter points it out, should the new one retort, “You also made a crooked path. Who are you to speak?” That is pride speaking, not wisdom.

When we admit how hard it is to live by what we say, we are less likely to scold others harshly. We begin to offer correction, not from a lofty perch, but from beside them, as fellow strugglers. That kind of counsel is far more likely to be heard.

After all, none of us walks through this life untouched by thorns. And there

Benjamin Addai Antwi-Boasiako

is grace in the humility of those who speak with the awareness that they, too, have been pricked.

28. Love yourself first (ɔsesea)

I once took a walk along the Main River in Frankfurt with my son, Kofi, who was then six. As we strolled, he moved to the outer edge of the pavement, nearer the water. I asked him to switch sides again, concerned he might slip and fall into the river.

He explained, quite earnestly, that he had moved because he was worried that *I* might fall in. It was better, he reasoned, that he be closer to danger. I tried to explain that I was older, perhaps sturdier, and in any case more likely to survive a fall. Besides, I added, if someone must die, it should be me. I had lived longer and seen a bit of life.

He paused for a moment before replying, “If one of us must die, it should be me. You can have another child and name him after me. But if you die, there is no way to replace you.”

There was something noble in his words, and something mistaken, too. I admired his heart, but I hoped he would learn, in time, to be more concerned with his own preservation. A person must first survive before they can be of any use to others.

This delicate balance between self-giving and self-neglect is one that even the trees must learn, though some, like the charcoal tree, *Trema guineensis*, seem to learn it too late. Known in Twi as *ɔsesea* or simply *sesea*, this tree is a hero of the forest. A pioneer species, it springs up first in depleted soil. It offers shade, shelters the young, and restores the earth by fixing nitrogen. Cocoa and coffee farmers often leave it standing in their fields for precisely this reason.

But its generosity proves its undoing. The very plants it nurtures eventually crowd it out. It cannot compete with them once they have grown strong. It dies, overtaken by those it helped raise. The elders say: *Osesea akurampɔn, mo na ɔdii afuo so kan, nso wannya adukuro* (Though the charcoal tree was first to arrive at the farm, it never developed buttress roots). The proverb is plain. In helping others, don't neglect your own foundation, or you may find that even your place has been taken.

Osesea is a modest tree, growing up to fifteen metres high. Its grey bark is smooth, its leaves simple and alternating along the stem. The wood is light, termite-resistant and widely used for charcoal. In the past, its bark was twisted into cords strong enough to bind a thief. The tree bears black fruits that birds are fond of, and its ashes were once used in soap-making. Folk medicine praises it still: a decoction of bark and leaves is taken for coughs and asthma, and used as a gargle for sore throats and even as a remedy for toothache.

Another proverb plays cleverly with the sound of the name: *Osesea si sie so, na woto boɔ se wode rebɔ asee na ammo asee na ekɔbɔ sesea mu a, ne nyinaa dane 'see'*. (If the charcoal tree stands upon an anthill and you hurl a stone at a woodpecker but miss and strike the tree, it makes the same 'see' sound). The idea is this: whether your offence was meant for another or not, the pain inflicted remains the same. The wounded do not much care about your intentions.

The deeper wisdom here is about self-care. The tree that stands and gives and supports all around it eventually collapses if it forgets to take root for itself. There is a caution in this for those of us who, perhaps with the best of intentions, wear ourselves out in the service of others while leaving our own needs untended.

In one of Ampofo Agyei's songs, he tells of a man advising that if you buy clothes for your partner, be sure to buy some for yourself as well. For if things fall apart, you will both need something respectable to wear in the search for love again. To buy for the other alone is to risk finding yourself alone and threadbare.

None of this is an argument against sacrifice. Sacrifice lies at the heart of love. But sacrifice, if it is not grounded in wisdom, can become a kind of self-erasure. We are not called to lose ourselves so completely in others that we no longer have anything left to give. The command to "love your neighbour as yourself" presumes that you already love yourself. Without that foundation, even love may falter.

As with *osesea*, we are most fruitful when we care for ourselves in order to care well for others. And if we are to stand in the clearing and offer shade to others, we must make sure we are firmly rooted first.

29. Solitude is the best society (maakube)

I was eighteen when I first used a water closet. I had been selected to represent the then Brong Ahafo Region in Sekondi, and we were accommodated at Fijai Secondary School. It was there, standing before the unfamiliar porcelain bowl, that I faced a dilemma.

The thing in the bowl stared at me as if expecting me to do something. After a few minutes of anxious staring, I noticed a small handle. With trepidation, I pressed it. A great gush of water followed. For a terrifying moment, I thought it might overflow. But then, to my amazement and immense relief, the water level sank, and the contents with it. It was nothing short of magic. Of course, I told no one. I had no idea if any of my colleagues were also mystified, so I kept my silence.

You see, in my village (and even at my secondary school), we didn't know the ways of plumbing. Toilets were fashioned by digging trenches and laying wooden planks over them. You squatted above, your bottom suspended, caressed by the wind. The experience was so common that *Mekɔ dua so* (I'm going to sit on the wood) is a polite way of saying we needed to relieve ourselves.

These trench latrines, often open to the elements, could hold many at once. Privacy was minimal. If you wished to see someone semi-naked, you needn't wait for a festival. A simple trip to the toilet while your neighbour was there would do. Many fights started this way, especially when both sexes shared the same facility. And however brave you were, you dared not squat beside your teacher or an elderly person. That would be a gross breach of decorum.

The proverb *Dua so yekɔ no tipɛn* (We go to the latrine with our peers) rein-

forces the idea that some things are best kept among equals. For when you visit such a place, you hear many things: the groans of the constipated, the rush of the afflicted. The sights are worse. Looking down could rob you of your appetite for days. Maggots and flies abounded. If a plank gave way, you might tumble in and come out... redefined.

Only the strongest wood could be trusted for the planks, and *maakube* (*Borassus flabellifer*) was among the finest. Known as the desert palm in English and *agor* in Ewe, *maakube* is a resilient tree. It survives bushfires and produces a straight trunk, though older ones develop a swelling near the crown that makes them difficult to climb.

The leaves, vast and fan-like, are used for hats, mats, brushes and thatching. Its fruit, borne on a cup-shaped calyx, contains three large seeds encased in a fibrous pulp. It wasn't my favourite, but others boiled it through the night, then cooked the juice with corn. It could be eaten with sugar or without. The calyx, shaped like a scoop, served as a natural spoon. The seed coat required persistence to remove, but the effort was rewarded.



Maakube - Borassus flabellifer

Maakube, as the name suggests, is akin to *kube*, the coconut (*Cocos nucifera*). Both are tall, unbranched, and difficult to climb without proper training or equipment. During the dry season, the fallen coconut leaves were burned for warmth. The elders say: *Kube si apemfo kurom a, epore gu* (If a coconut stands in a town of pregnant women, its nuts fall wastefully). The point being that if no one can use a resource, it may be squandered through no fault of its own.

Coconuts, by the way, are not technically nuts. They are drupes. The water in a young coconut quenches thirst, and both coconut water and *maakube* juice are known to loosen the bowels. Thus, one who overindulges must prepare to

squat on a wooden plank and pray that no teacher is present. If a teacher was already there, you had to hold it, sweating, pacing, and reconsidering your life choices. If things became urgent, you might dash into the bushes, dignity abandoned.

In those days, we feared no toilet. Today, however, some of the pampered city youth cannot use a public facility at all. There is now a word for it: *paruresis*, or shy bladder syndrome. Oh, how things have changed. I still remember Fijai Secondary School fondly because it was there that I first used the WC. It marked a transition, though I didn't realise it at the time, from communal latrines to private plumbing, from shared awkwardness to personal solitude.

And perhaps, looking back, that solitude was the true gift. There is something deeply human in finding a private place, even for such an undignified business. Solitude, the elders might say, is the best society. In that cubicle, I faced the unfamiliar, alone. And I emerged changed.

30. Everyone in society matters (mprampuro)

There are moments when I wonder whether I am just succumbing to *rosy retrospection*, that peculiar tendency to recall the past in softer hues than it likely deserved. Yet, even with that caution in mind, I remain convinced that Christmases of old were, indeed, more enchanting. At least, they were for those of us raised in village simplicity, where wealth was measured in shared laughter and smoky firelight.

By mid-December, the harmattan had fully arrived. The air was dry, our lips cracked, our skin parched. Mosquitoes, it seemed, took their annual leave. In their absence, we gathered around fires outdoors, talking into the night while roasting plantains. Somewhere, a tape recorder wheezed out Kakyire Kwame Appiah's 24th track until the batteries gave out with a tired whimper. No one complained.

And then came the bamboo canons.

Constructed from stems of *mprampuro* (bamboo), they were masterpieces of youthful ingenuity. We would hollow the stem, leave one node intact, and bore a small hole near it. Into this we dropped calcium carbide, then a splash of water. The chemical would hiss, then belch white smoke. We would light it. BOOM! The neighbourhood replied: BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! It was a sort of primitive chorus, dotted by the occasional misfortune of a bamboo stem splitting, sending the operator fleeing, laughter trailing behind.

We were poor, yes. But we were full of contentment.

Mprampuro, that "giant grass," is far more than it seems. There are over a

thousand bamboo species across the world. Still, the one most familiar to us (*Oxytenanthera abyssinica*) grows in tight clusters, thrives on riverbanks, and crowds out other vegetation with an insistence. It is humble in appearance, yet persistent in presence.

A Twi proverb captures its hidden worth: *Offin ho nua no ebi ara ne mprampuro* (Bamboo is also one of the trees along the Offin River). In days past, the Offin was flanked by majestic timber trees. In their company, the modest bamboo was scarcely acknowledged. The lesson is that one's value should not be measured by grandeur. Even the quietest members of society matter.

Indeed, *mprampuro* is far from useless. In village life, its stem forms the skeleton of roofs, both rafter and cover. It becomes beds, fences, baskets, and furniture. Its thick clusters shield crops from wind and protect the soil from erosion. Its leaves soothe jigger infestations and remedy urinary ailments. In times of need, even the dry leaves served as toilet paper.

A second proverb speaks of maternal sacrifice: *Obaatan ko ne pampuro mu a, ade ne to bini ba fie* (When a mother goes to her bamboo plantation, she returns with uncleaned buttocks). She could use the leaves, certainly, but a crying baby calls louder than her own discomfort. The proverb, like all good ones, uses the particular to reveal the universal: those at the margins often give the most.

Bamboo also found its voice in music. Small stems became *atentenben*, the traditional funeral flute, which now sings in contemporary settings. Larger stems joined us in village ensembles, where we pounded out rhythm with gusto. Our symphony was a chorus of *kakeka-keka, gren-gren!* – crude, joyful, unforgettable.

Today, as our forests shrink and hardwoods vanish, perhaps we might look again to the lowly bamboo. Might we revive the music, the laughter, the ingenuity it supported? Might we, like the mothers in the proverb, rediscover a resource we've long overlooked because it wasn't wrapped in prestige?

In remembering bamboo, we remember ourselves: the earlier selves who knew how to be poor and yet full. The ones who measured joy in the sound of a bamboo canon cracking the night.

Indeed, in this humble reed lies a deep lesson: the small matter, the overlooked endure, and every stem has its place along the riverbank.

Section D: Relationships and Interpersonal Dynamics

This part investigates the details of human relationships, diving into the way love and generosity work. It includes proverbs that warn about what happens when you're not honest and explores how being generous to each other is essential. These essays highlight how real connections matter and show the problems that come when you don't appreciate your relationships.

31. Beware of Greeks bearing gifts (ahyehyewonsa)

Greek mythology has furnished the English language with a store of memorable expressions. Consider *Pandora's box* for an action that unleashes unforeseen trouble, or *Achilles' heel* to describe a hidden vulnerability. There is the *Trojan horse*, which appears benign yet brings ruin from within, and the *sword of Damocles*, which hangs ominously above the fortunate. One may also be *caught between Scylla and Charybdis*, or possess the *Midas touch*, or rise, like the *Phoenix*, from the ashes of ruin. A *Herculean task* demands unusual strength, and the *Gordian knot* resists ordinary solutions. *Hydra-headed* problems multiply when attacked. There is the *Oedipus complex*, the plight of *Cassandra*, and of course, the age-old warning: *beware of Greeks bearing gifts*.

It is this last that interests us.

The story is familiar. Paris of Troy abducted Helen, the wife of King Menelaus of Sparta. In response, Menelaus' brother Agamemnon led the Greeks to Troy to retrieve her, launching a war that dragged on for a decade. Heroes fell on both sides. Ajax, Hector, Paris, and Achilles perished. Yet after ten long years, neither side could claim victory.

Then came the trick of Odysseus. The Greeks built a great wooden horse, hollow inside, and filled it with armed men. They pretended to abandon the siege, leaving behind one soldier, Sinon, who was tasked with persuading the Trojans to draw the horse into their city. With careful lies and theatrical emotion, Sinon succeeded. The Trojans, believing the horse a sacred offering, ignored the warnings of Laocoon and Cassandra and pulled it within the walls.

That night, the Greeks emerged from the horse, opened the gates to their returning comrades, and Troy was destroyed. It is a story as old as storytelling itself: those who wish to deceive us offer what we most desire. They show us protection, honour, beauty, or victory. And so, we welcome them into our homes, or our hearts, and suffer the penalties.

If politicians lie, perhaps it is because they know the truth rarely wins elections. People do not vote for a man who says, “I will do what is right, even if it doesn’t please you.” They vote for the man who promises protection, prosperity, and perpetual happiness. Even when they know, deep down, it is unlikely to be true.

It took Homer many pages to explain this principle. My ancestors managed it in a single proverb: *Se abyebyewonsa nye aserewa de a, anka yemfa nsum no fidie* (If the sunbird did not find the fruit of *Urera mannii* delightful, we would not use it to trap it).

Abyebyewonsa, sometimes translated as “burning hands,” is a forest climber with winged stems. Its seeds, small and brightly coloured, are irresistible to sunbirds. These birds are not caught by force or violence. They are lured by beauty, and so the hunter gets what he wants by offering what the bird desires.

Humans also make use of *abyebyewonsa*. Its leaves can be cooked as a vegetable, often alongside *bonhon* (*Laportea aestuans*; see page 115). A decoction of the leaves is said to relieve dysentery and diarrhoea. In the past, pregnant women added them to palm nut soup to ease bowel movement.

But it is the bird, and not the stew, that gives the proverb its meaning. We are most easily deceived not by what we hate, but by what we love. Marketers understand this. They hire famous people to tell us what to buy because we are more likely to believe a lie when it comes from someone we admire. So too do fraudsters, who would never try to tempt us with things we detest. They offer what we crave: success, wealth, romance, health.

Beware, then, when the gift looks too good, for it may be no gift at all. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Not for birds. Not for men. Not even for Trojans.

32. Generosity is reciprocal (anwonomo)

I sometimes catch myself thinking that rice tasted better in the past. Yet, no sooner has the thought emerged than the inner philosopher begins his familiar counterarguments. Perhaps rice wasn't inherently better, but I ate it only on special days. Scarcity, as ever, heightens pleasure. Back then, rice appeared only at Christmas or on *Our Day*, the festive revel that marked the end of the school year.

On ordinary school days, rice was strictly forbidden. Your mother would warn, *moo mme* (rice will not fill you). She would instead recommend something more sustaining, like *banku*, made of fermented corn and cassava dough, or *abete*, from dried, pounded cassava. These foods were filling. Rice, by comparison, was luxury, too refined to burden the stomach, too costly to waste on routine hunger.

Still, I'm tempted to insist that rice really did taste better. Imagine, for instance, a mound of rice wrapped snugly in an *anwonomo* leaf. You open the parcel only slightly, peeling it back just enough to scoop the rice with your fingers, as though coaxing a crab from its hole. Only near the end do you fully open the leaf to mop up the last grains. What in the modern world, with its perfumed rice and plastic packaging, can rival that experience?

It turns out my nostalgia may be rooted in fact. The *anwonomo* leaf, known to botanists as *Marantochloa conferta* or *Thaumatococcus daniellii*, contains a protein that sweetens food. So, this wasn't just my memory playing tricks. Rice truly did taste better in those days. And yet, in the name of modern convenience,

Benjamin Addai Antwi-Boasiako

we've surrendered that unique flavour. Our fragrant imports can't match the taste of even the *tugyimii* – that humble, low-grade rice of old.



Anwonomo - Marantochloa conferta

The *anwonomo* plant is native to swampy areas. It has no true stem and bears pale purple flowers. Its broad leaves are its glory, and one can find them in abundance at the Legon Botanical Gardens in Accra (a place worth visiting). Beyond wrapping rice, these leaves serve for packaging other foods, though not all dishes benefit from their enhancing effect.

There is a plant related to *anwonomo* called *aburobia* (*Canna indica*), known as *toviaku* in Ewe. It also has large leaves, though its flowers are red. Unlike *anwonomo*, *aburobia* grows almost everywhere: in gardens, along roadsides, and beside homes. Some mash its leaves into bathwater as a remedy for fever. Others use its flowers to treat eye conditions. These flowers also offer a sweet nectar, eagerly sought by birds during the dry season when water becomes scarce.

Children, quick to spot opportunity, use this fact to their advantage. They wait near the plants to hunt birds as they sip. Hence, the Akans say, *Ohia nti na aserewa sisi aburobia soɔ* (Scarcity forces the sunbird to perch on the Canna). Need makes the cautious bold. Thirst drives the bird to expose itself.

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Aburobia - Canna indica

There is another Akan proverb which unites these two plants in one lesson: *Aburobia abahan kɔ kwaem a, na anwonomo abahan reba fie* (When the *aburobia* leaves go to the forest, the *anwonomo* leaves come back to the house). This proverb turns on the idea of mutual giving. *Aburobia*, so common in towns, might be used to wrap a gift when one visits the countryside. *Anwonomo*, native to the village, wraps the gift in return. One good turn deserves another.

Modern life tempts us to measure generosity in terms of cost. Yet our ancestors knew that what matters most is reciprocity. Don't always be the one saying, "Thank you." Give others the opportunity to say it to you. Mutual kindness binds society together more firmly than any law.

33. It's easy to trivialise the pains of others (bankye)

South America has given the world many gifts, though few have found a more welcome home in West Africa than cassava (*Manihot esculenta*). Precisely how or when Ghanaians began cultivating it remains uncertain, but today cassava is one of our staple foods, so entrenched in our diet that it feels as if it has always been here.

From cassava, we make *gari*, *fufuo*, *konkonte*, and *akyeke*, with *fufuo* holding pride of place on the Ghanaian table. Known as *bankye* in Twi, *bangye* in Sefwi, *duade* in Ga, and *agbeli* in Krobo and Ewe, cassava's names are as diverse as its uses.

Traditionally, *fufuo* is made by boiling the cassava root (with yam, plantain, or cocoyam) and pounding the pieces in a wooden mortar until they form a smooth, elastic mass. This is eaten with soup, often a peppery light soup, and seasoned with dried fish and chevon. Nowadays, of course, many have opted for the powdered version: a simple matter of stirring and heating. It saves time, yes, but some argue that it also sacrifices taste. The old-fashioned version, they say, is richer. It must be pounded, served warm, eaten with fingers, and swallowed whole without chewing.

Though we prize the root, the plant offers more. The young leaves are edible and can be cooked like spinach. They are also fed to animals; goats, in particular, seem to relish them. Crushed leaves are scattered to repel driver ants (*nkrane*) and sometimes applied as a folk remedy for chickenpox and other skin infections.

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Cassava is also a source of starch and, in parts of South America, fermented into a drink called *kasiri*.

The cassava plant usually has many forked branches. From this, a proverb says *Fontomfrom da Kwaku Adu kon ho a, wose eda bankye akore mu* (When the great drum rests on someone's shoulders, you claim it is lying in the fork of a cassava stick). The proverb reproves a lack of sympathy. You look at someone carrying a heavy burden, and because you don't feel the weight yourself, you presume it must be light. How easily we dismiss the sufferings of others, especially when we have not borne them.

Cassava is interesting here, for harvesting it is no light work. The process begins by cutting the upper stem, then grasping the stump firmly and pulling the thick roots from the soil. These roots cling to the earth as though reluctant to leave it. Once the roots are pulled, a portion of the stem is often cut and replanted (stem cuttings propagate cassava). There is another proverb that draws from this same image: *Obaa a Onkye awaree ase na Otuo bankye a, Onnua* (A woman who does not intend to stay in a marriage will not replant when she harvests cassava).

The thought here is straightforward. If she doesn't expect to be around next year, she will not go to the trouble of ensuring there is food for the future. She harvests but does not sow. The saying suggests two things: first, that we avoid investing in anything from which we don't expect to benefit; second, that our deepest intentions often betray themselves in small, unconscious acts.

As to how cassava came to Ghana, we can only speculate. One clue may lie in history. Some three centuries ago, Ghana suffered a severe drought, so severe that the waters of Lake Bosomtwe receded dramatically. The lake, usually full and deep, became so shallow that vegetation began to grow on its exposed basin. Might that have been the time the Portuguese introduced cassava to Ghana? We can't say with certainty. Yet it is a plausible guess, for cassava is drought-resistant and could have offered a much-needed food source when other crops failed.

Whatever its past, cassava may also be part of our future. As climate change brings harsher seasons and less predictable rain, crops that endure hardship will become more valuable. Perhaps cassava, long overlooked in favour of more glamorous grains, will prove to be a hero of difficult days. In the meantime, let us be cautious before judging another's load. What lies on their shoulders may be heavier than it looks from where we stand.

34. Simple problems need simple solutions (*bonhon*)

Sir John, the late Kwadwo Owusu Afriyie, was no ordinary politician. He possessed a kind of basic eloquence, a habit of using what one might call ‘village vocabulary’ to make sense of national questions. In his final radio interview, while weighing President Mahama’s chances in the 2020 elections, he put it quite simply: *Se yɛɛkɛte bonhon ne nkontomire a, yɛnhia sekan* (We don’t need a machete to pluck *bonhon* and *nkontomire*). His point was clear. The task, in his view, was not a difficult one. It did not require drama, strategy or steel.

Many Ghanaians will recognise *nkontomire*, the tender leaves of the cocoyam plant, but *bonhon* is more elusive. Yet it once held a proud place in the Ghanaian kitchen. Long before *nkontomire* became the chief ingredient in *abunabunu* (green-green soup), *bonhon* (also known as *hunhon*) was the leaf of choice. This native herb (*Laportea aestuans*), sometimes called the West Indian wood nettle, is a modest plant with a hairy surface. Its stem, when crushed, gives off a faint sliminess. It yields easily to the fingers when plucked, which is why it needs no machete.

But plucking *bonhon* and removing it cleanly are not the same thing. The plant has a curious habit of coming up by the roots when pulled. In that way, it teaches a kind of gentle resistance. While soft and pliant above ground, it is quietly tenacious beneath. One often finds it growing in places where the mighty *onyina* (silk-cotton tree) once stood; a reminder, perhaps, that life springs where giants have fallen.

Cocoyam, or *mankani* as we call it in Twi, is said to have come to us from the

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West Indies. That might explain why, in earlier times, it played no part in *abunabunu*. But it has taken root in Ghanaian kitchens all the same. Its large, starchy corms are edible and versatile; boiled for *ampesie*, pounded into *fufuo*, or mashed into *etɔ*. There is even a kind of pudding made from it, called *nubuu*.

Children used to giggle over the younger cocoyam roots, which have an unfortunate resemblance to something impolite. These *kɔ̃trekɔ̃* are cooked with their skins on, as are the mature roots (known as *akaw*), which are peeled only after cooking. One of the most satisfying forms is *mankanidwo*, where the roots are roasted over fire until the outer skin burns black. Scraping this away reveals a tough shell enclosing the soft, delicious core. It is a dish best eaten slowly, with patience.

The leaves of cocoyam, soft and tender, are used much like spinach. And so, if someone boasts about their strength or skill, a sceptic might reply with another Akan proverb: *Eta se nim adee pɔtɔ a, mpɔtɔ dwoa ma yenhwe, nye nkontomire* (If the short wooden pestle claims it can pound, let it pound palm kernels, not cocoyam leaves). It is easy to make bold claims when the task is light.

Before *mankani* came to Ghana, however, we had *kooko* (*Colocasia antiquorum*, or taro). This native cousin prefers wetter conditions and is often found growing in swamps. The edible part lies in its lower stem, which, when cooked, turns a gentle purple and releases a subtle flavour. Its leaves, unlike those of cocoyam, are not eaten. They differ in shape and are almost waterproof; pour water on them, and it slides off, leaving the surface dry.

Even so, the leaves of *kooko* can also be plucked without the help of a blade. Like *bonhon* and *nkontomire*, they don't call for great force. They remind us, as Sir John did, that not all things require sharp tools or heavy hands. Some tasks are simple. They ask only for gentleness, common sense, and a bit of understanding.

In a world increasingly drawn to the complex, we often forget this. We reach for machinery where hands will do, summon experts when the village elder could explain it better, and use big words for small truths. But the wisdom of *bonhon* is plain. If the task is simple, use simple means.

35. One tree is not a forest (esia)

When Boris Johnson, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, attended the UK-Africa Investment Summit in early 2020, he quoted an Akan proverb: *Nsatea nyinaa nnye pe* (All the fingers are not the same). He had picked it up during a visit to Ghana, and interpreted it, rather proudly, to mean that nations, like fingers, are not equal, and that Britain, by implication, is the longest, the strongest, the deftest of the hand.

Now, there is truth in his interpretation. The Akans do indeed recognise that some stand taller than others. But they also understand something more philosophical: that strength alone is not sufficient. However high a tree may grow, it cannot declare itself a forest. So, our elders say: *Esia nko ara nye kwae* (The stinkwood tree alone does not make a forest).

The *esia* tree (also called *esa* in some Twi dialects) rises to remarkable heights, sometimes over forty-five metres. It wears a splendid crown and casts a proud shadow. Yet, despite all its grandeur, it can't claim to be a forest. It needs companions. Shrubs, lianas, vines and undergrowth must spring up around it. The mighty tree must share space with the creeping ones, the gnarled, the unnoticed. Only then does a forest come into being.

So it is with nations, and with individuals. The chief executive needs the cleaner. The master requires the apprentice. The lecturer depends on the student. One might stand tall, but one never stands alone.

The English name *stinkwood* derives from the tree's freshly cut timber, which gives off a sharp, unpleasant odour (an offence that disappears as the wood

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dries). It is said that once upon a time, a man and his mother-in-law went to the farm. Suddenly, a funky scent hit the air! Both wondered if the smell was from the other. The man turned, and lo and behold, there stood a stinkwood. He knew at once that it was the tree that was wafting its "perfume" like no tomorrow. The man then said, *Asew, enye wo a; asew, enye me a, eye esa* (In-law, it is neither your fault nor mine; it is the *esa* tree). You say that when you believe a third person is behind a friction developing between you and your long-time friend.

The sapwood is pale, almost yellowish, while the heartwood is rich, dark and reddish, often streaked with deeper lines.

Its scientific name, *Combretodendron macrocarpum* (or *Petersia africana*), hides its practical challenges. The timber tends to split during drying, and if left untreated, it is vulnerable to fungi. Yet when polished, it hardens against insects and termites. It is unsuitable for intricate work such as plywood, but it is ideal for heavy, blunt tasks such as bridge beams, railway sleepers, and firewood.

In fact, *esia-gya* is the name given to the finest firewood. When a tree falls, townsfolk gather to split it into logs for cooking fires. And so, another proverb enters the scene: *Baabi a esia abu aguo no, mmabaaa mpa ho da* (Where the stinkwood tree has fallen, pieces of sticks are always present). *Mmabaaa* may refer to tree saplings, but in this case, it signifies the slivers and fragments left behind when a great trunk is split. The meaning is layered. It reminds us that even after a great person has departed, much remains: influence, memory, wisdom, example. What is scattered is not lost.

The tree gives more than wood. Its greenish-brown, rough bark contains gum and is pounded for medicine. A bitter decoction of the bark is drunk to loosen phlegm or to treat venereal diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhoea. The foul-smelling bark becomes a source of healing. That, too, is a lesson worth learning.

In Britain's long history, she has indeed been a tall tree. At her peak, her shadow stretched over vast regions. But as the 2018 World Cup bid reminded her (when England's proposal lost to Russia), great stature doesn't guarantee success. A forest is more than a single tree. No matter how straight its trunk or how fine its grain, it needs others to become something greater than itself.

Another Akan proverb reminds us: *Ti koro nko agyina* (One head does not consult itself). In days past, when a decision had to be made in public council, a group might leave the assembly, saying they were off to ask the old woman (*Yeko bisa aberewa*). This was not a literal visit, but a way of stepping aside to consult in quiet, away from listening ears. This act of discreet consultation, known as

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agyina, only made sense when there was more than one mind to confer with. A man on his own may reflect. But true deliberation needs others.

The symbol of *agyina* is used in Akan art and design to represent dialogue and collaboration. No matter how wise a head may be, it can't arrive at wisdom in solitude. No matter how mighty a nation, it can't shape the world alone. So yes, all fingers aren't the same. But every hand needs them all. The thumb doesn't boast of its grip without the aid of the others. And a tree, no matter how tall, must not forget the lowly moss at its base.

36. Happiness is found in mutual aid (kagya)

Ghana's year has two faces: one green with rain, the other dusted with harmattan wind. From April to October, the rains come. Plants flourish. Streams run fat. But from November to March, the air dries, and many plants curl up and die. The soil becomes brittle, the trees bare, the grass thin and faded.

But not all retreat. Some press on. One such is the *kagya* plant (*Griffonia simplicifolia*). Where others wither, *kagya* keeps green. It tends to grow on mounds (*esie*) and during the wet season, its thick leaves spill down the sides of the mound, sheltering the soil beneath. And when the dry months arrive, the mound returns the favour. It holds enough hidden moisture to keep the roots of the *kagya* alive, even under a harsh sun. A thought might arise here: should the mound thank the plant? Or should the plant thank the mound? But our elders are not sentimental. They simply say: *Esie ne kagya nni aseda* (Between the *kagya* and the mound, there is no need for thanks).

The proverb teaches that when a relationship is naturally mutual, gratitude, at least the spoken sort, becomes unnecessary. There is no debt. Both give. Both receive. And neither keeps score. We might apply this wisdom at home. If a husband tells his wife, "Thank you," she might well smile and respond, "*Esie ne kagya nni aseda*." In other words, "There's no need, for I, too, have reasons to thank you."

Now, don't mistake this for discourtesy. Thankfulness is one of the graces of life. But even good things can be overused. If you say thank you too often for the same sort of deed, the words may wear thin, like a coin passed through too many

hands. What once felt precious begins to feel automatic. Psychologists call this *habituation*. We become blind to the blessings that never cease. The best appreciation is if people stop appreciating you. It means you have consistently been good, and your goodness is taken for granted.

Take air, for example. No one wakes up every morning saying, “Thank you, oxygen.” Yet without it, we would not draw a single breath. If your spouse stops thanking you for a good thing you always do, perhaps it is because that good thing has become part of the very atmosphere of the home. And like air, it is silently cherished, even if not daily named.

Back to *kagya*, also known as *kanya* in Ga. It is a resilient, many-gifted shrub. You’ll find it on coastal plains, in grass savannahs, and in secondary forests. Its roots and stems serve as chewing sticks. Beaten, the root becomes a natural toothbrush, what we call *sawie* in Twi. The flexible stems, softened over fire or sun, are woven into large carrying baskets. Its leaves feed goats and sheep. And its pods, which burst open in April or May, mark the beginning of the planting season.

Children blow the pods like whistles, calling them *totototoo*. The juice from the leaves is used as an enema and said to relieve kidney troubles. Leaves placed in henhouses help rid the birds of lice. A tea made from the leafy stems serves both as a tonic and a medicine: for congestion, for stomach complaints, even as a mild aphrodisiac.

A plant so generous deserves our gratitude. But unlike the *esie* mound, we *can* say thank you. We are not a passive earth. We are not just a heap of clay under the sun. We are beings who can choose to notice, to cherish, to give back.

Mutual aid is one of the forgotten joys of civilisation. Not a transaction, not a favour given to be returned, but an exchange of strength for strength. One gives water. The other offers shade. One shelters. The other sustains.

In such a life, happiness grows like the *kagya* on the mound: green, steady, and quietly enduring.

37. The wisdom of limits (ᾠδαδεε)

When Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann, died in November 1952, the Israeli ambassador to the United States wrote to Albert Einstein and asked if he would accept the presidency. According to *The New York Times*, Einstein declined the offer in a handwritten note: "I lack both the natural aptitude and the experience to deal properly with people and exercise official functions."

That reply, humble and clear-eyed, echoes something said nearly 165 years earlier by another mind of renown. In 1787, as the United States Constitution was being drafted in Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin, then eighty-one, urged his fellow delegates to support the document, though he had reservations.

"Having lived long," Franklin said, "I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information, or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgement, and to pay more respect to the judgement of others."

Two towering figures, both standing aside in wisdom. Einstein recognised his shortcomings: that he was not, by nature or training, a man for public office. Franklin admitted that he could be mistaken, even in matters he once thought certain. What these men offer us is humility and the fact that no one is sufficient in all things. Each of us is bound by context, and there will always be others who surpass us in certain fields.

To accept this is wisdom. Indeed, it sets apart the truly great. The Akans understood this well, and in their proverbs, they encoded this understanding

with clarity. They turned to the baobab tree (*ɔdadee* or sometimes *ɔtɔwaa*) to express the lesson. The tree is extraordinary in its range of uses. It provides for people in ways both humble and ingenious: for food, for medicine, for fibre, and for shelter. But even the baobab, for all its bulk and seeming majesty, cannot do everything.

The proverb runs: *Yede kokuroko na edi anim a, anka yede ɔdadee si dan* (If we use sheer bulk to lead, we should use the baobab tree to build a house). But of course, we don't. The wood of the baobab is soft, spongy, and unsuitable for building. Its greatness lies elsewhere.

I once saw a baobab in Northern Ghana, between Bolgatanga and Paga, that stood about eighteen metres tall and nearly as wide. It had the unmistakable presence of age. Baobabs grow slowly and may live for hundreds of years. With stumpy branches, sparse foliage, and a stem that looks swollen and gouty, it appears both misshapen and magnificent.

Nearly every part of the baobab has its use. The fruit, known in Twi as *kwakuo-nkate* (monkey groundnut), is particularly valuable. The pulp and seeds are both edible. The pulp, which tastes of lemon, contains malic and tartaric acids, glucose, reducing sugars, pectic substances, and potassium acid tartrate, all suspended in mucilage. Stirred into water, boiled, and cooled, it forms a tangy, cooling drink.

The seeds acquire an almond-like flavour after roasting, soaking, and fermenting (in a process not unlike that used for the African locust bean). When ground and mixed with millet meal, they are made into a thin gruel and drunk. Alternatively, they are washed, pounded, and steeped in water for ten days to flavour soup.

The seed shells and bark, once turned to ash, yield a potash-rich material used for making soap. The seeds also serve as fuel and are even fashioned into necklaces. Potters use them to polish and smooth earthenware before firing. The young leaves are well-suited to soup and are sold either dried or powdered. The fresh, tender leaves serve as a spinach substitute.

The inner bark yields strong fibre, used for baskets, horse girths, rope, and strings for musical instruments. Remarkably, the baobab can regenerate its bark after it has been stripped. All parts of the plant are known to help treat fevers. The bark gum is used to clean wounds, while the bark itself, along with the stem and fibres from the fruit husk, is used to treat *amenorrhoea* (the absence of menstruation in women of reproductive age).

The wood, although not strong enough for structural work, is nonetheless used for canoes, fishing net floats, and wooden panels. The hard fruit husks are

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also used as floats, as fuel, and for making containers. Trees with hollow trunks are employed as water storage vessels. In other cases, the hollow baobabs serve as bathrooms, dairies, meeting places, prisons, refrigerators, stables, or granaries.

Its pollen, mixed with water, produces a glue used in carpentry. The bark serves for tanning, and the green bark yields dye. The powdered stem and fruit peel are even used as a tobacco substitute. It is a tree so useful, so full of life and legend, that it has inspired countless folktales, superstitions, and anecdotal wisdom across Africa.

And yet, for all this abundance, the baobab cannot serve as good firewood. It burns poorly, and its charcoal is weak. This is the heart of the matter. The baobab is mighty, yes, and yet, not sufficient in all things. It cannot provide everything. There are gifts it doesn't possess, and tasks it cannot perform.

And so it is with us. Greatness is found in being fully what one is meant to be. Knowing your limits is not defeat. It is dignity.

38. Thorns of fair-weather friends (*ɔhwiremo*)

In *Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene V, King Claudius utters a line laced with tired truth: “When sorrows come, they come not single spies but in battalions.” It is as though grief conspires with itself, piling affliction upon affliction until the soul scarcely knows which way is up. Misfortune is rarely solitary.

When adversity strikes, it often feels as though the universe has turned against us. One trouble brings another, and then another. The Akans put it plainly: *Asuo fa wo a, ebo nnua nyinaa tan wo* (When you are drowning, everything connected with the river rejects you). You’re caught in a river’s current, gasping for grip. You reach for the branches at the bank, for the grasses on the shore. Yet they snap in your hand. In such moments, even the things that ought to help seem to betray you.

And so it is with people. In our hour of need, those we trusted sometimes vanish, or worse, turn against us. When a person forsakes you precisely when you are weakest, the Akans say: *W’aworɔ me mpaboa ewɔ ɔhwiremo mu* (You have removed my shoes amid prickles). A vivid image, and a painful one. You are already walking through thorns, and someone, someone you thought was a friend, chooses that moment to take away your protection.

In the streets, mercy is rare. Compassion is often a mask, easily set aside when inconvenience arises. What you intended as a cry for help may be heard as an invitation to exploit. The weak are not always comforted. Too often, they are used.

The plant *ɔhwiremo*, from which this proverb draws its sting, is also known as *wota*. It is a straggling shrub, its branches armed with piercing thorns. Beneath its

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reddish flowers lie white terminal bracts that attract bees. The name *ɔhwiremo* means “piercing through,” for no one walks through it unscathed. You cannot pass through it barefoot. Thus, if someone takes away your shoes while you walk upon *ɔhwiremo*, they leave you utterly exposed at the worst possible moment.

Known to science as *Combretum racemosum*, the plant grows beside roads and in clearings. Its form is modest, but it makes a striking ornamental shrub. More than that, it is valued in traditional medicine and even as a soup condiment. It is used to destroy parasitic worms (its anthelmintic properties are well recognised) and to fight microbial infection. It treats convulsive coughing, haemorrhoids, male sterility, toothache, and even tuberculosis.

Modern studies now confirm what tradition long held: the plant’s extracts possess anti-inflammatory, anti-ulcer, and vasorelaxant effects.

Yet even within its habitat, *ɔhwiremo* must contend with rivals. It is considered subordinate to a more dominant plant on forest paths: *ɔkwan-fanu* (also known as *ananse nkateɛ* in Twi or *Desmodium adscendens* to botanists). The name *ɔkwan-fanu* means “both sides of the road,” for that is where it grows: flanking the forest tracks like a guard. A proverb teaches us: *Ɔkwan-fanu a ɔde ne kwan te ase a, ɔhwiremo nnye kwan* (If *Desmodium*, the one who owns the road, is alive, then the *Combretum* does not take over). So even the thorny *ɔhwiremo* must yield when its better is present.

The leaves of *ɔkwan-fanu* resemble groundnuts, hence the name *ananse nkateɛ*, or “spider’s groundnuts.” The seed pods, covered in tiny, hooked hairs, cling to passing clothing or skin. In this way, the plant ensures its own dispersal. It thrives where there is movement.

In folk medicine, the leaves are boiled and the liquid drunk to treat constipation. It also relieves allergies, asthma, back pain and muscle spasms. Where *ɔhwiremo* pricks, *ɔkwan-fanu* soothes.

There are even superstitions that linger around *ɔhwiremo*. Once, when a palm branch pricked me, an uncle advised a curious remedy. Should it happen again, he said, I ought to ask aloud: “How can *ɔhwiremo* prick as painfully as palm branches?” Likewise, if the palm should wound me, I should say: “Can the palm be as painful as *ɔhwiremo*?” He believed the pain would lessen. I suspect the relief was more of the mind than the body.

So let us remember: not all who smile are friends. Not all who stay are loyal. When trouble comes, and it will, some will remain, and others will vanish. Yet even then, we are not entirely without consolation. The thorn may wound, but it teaches. The river may resist us, but it shows who truly stands on the bank.

39. Pride comes before the fall (ɔpampamya)

In the myths of ancient Greece, one sin was punished more swiftly and severely than almost any other: *hubris*. This was a dangerous inflation of the self, the kind that led mortals to challenge the gods. Such defiance was never left unanswered.

Niobe, daughter of King Tantalus and wife of King Amphion, stands as one of the most tragic examples. She bore fourteen children (seven sons and seven daughters) and allowed this abundance to swell her sense of superiority. She mocked the Titan Leto, who had given birth to only two children: the gods Apollo and Artemis.

It was a cruel and needless boast. Leto wept, and her children responded with divine vengeance. Apollo killed Niobe's sons; Artemis slaughtered her daughters. Stripped of everything, Niobe fled to her native Phrygia. There, she turned to stone on Mount Sipylus. Snow still melts upon that rock, and legend says the water that trickles from it is Niobe's weeping.

The moral is not unique to Greek myth. The Bible warns that pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. The Quran teaches that Allah does not love the proud and the boastful. Pride, if left unchecked, ends in grief. It blinds us to our limits, and soon enough, the world reminds us of them.

The Akans carry this wisdom too. There is a proverb: *Wobu wo ho kokuroko a, na yede akuma twa wo* (If you think yourself a great tree, we fell you with an axe). The implication is striking. Smaller trees may be cut with a cutlass, but if you presume to be mighty, you will be struck with the tools reserved for giants.

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Even a sapling pretending to be a sequoia will be brought down, and perhaps more harshly than necessary.

Another proverb drives the point home: *Ɔpampamya, wonye ogya bi, na yede wo anane sika na yeagyae de wo aye biribiara* (Firewood from the Albizia tree, you are not so important that, although we use you to melt gold, we cannot also use you for other tasks). This is the nature of the tree *Ɔpampam* (*Albizia adianthifolia*). Because goldsmiths use its charcoal in the process of melting gold, one might assume it is superior to other trees. But this usefulness doesn't make it universally excellent. Its firewood burns too quickly, and its heartwood is often soft or rotten, making it unsuitable as timber. You can't use it to cook kenkey, for instance, because the fire dies too swiftly.

And here is the point, which comes up again and again in this section of the book: excellence in one field doesn't imply greatness in all. The wise know this. The proud forget it.

Still, the *Ɔpampam* has its strengths. In folk medicine, it is widely respected. A brew from the bark is used as an enema to aid female fertility. The powdered bark, mixed with honey, destroys parasitic worms. Hot or cold bark infusions are applied to scabies and other skin complaints. The bark pulp is also used in enemas, and a decoction from the stem is drunk as a purgative. Swollen legs are treated first by balancing the condition and then by applying a medicinal paste made from a gall shaped like a snake.

So yes, the *Ɔpampam* is essential in its way. It contributes to medicine, to goldsmithing, and to healing. But it is not all-sufficient. It is not the whole forest. And if it forgets this, if it boasts, it risks being judged by the very standard it tried to claim.

In the end, the lesson is clear. However great your gifts, however bright your moment, stay grounded. The axe doesn't care whether the tree was noble yesterday. It fells what overreaches today.

40. The beauty of mutual help (sɔprɔpɔ)

The other day, I saw a video circulating on *TikTok*. It showed cocoa farmers in China using a machine to crack open their cocoa pods. It was swift, efficient, almost clinical. In contrast, farmers in Ghana still perform this task by hand. At first glance, it would seem the Chinese method is superior. Quicker. Less labour-intensive. More advanced.

Yet, there is another side to the story. In Ghana, no farmer expects to break open an entire harvest of cocoa pods alone. They call upon neighbours, and those neighbours come gladly. Within hours, the work is done. No machines, only people.

And as they work, they talk. They discuss farming problems, weather patterns, pests, marriages, money troubles, small triumphs and shared fears. There is no need to schedule a gathering. The work itself becomes the fellowship. In a world where parties are rare, these acts of help are often the most meaningful social events in rural life.

Machines may one day do the job faster. But they will also do it silently. We should ask ourselves: Is speed all that matters? Some thinkers, especially those studying early human societies, argue that the mutual exchange of help and resources was both a social tool and a biological engine behind human evolution. In this, our ancestors were wise. They wove their reverence for cooperation into proverbs, where the moral lesson was carried in metaphor.

One such proverb says: *Bere a supurupu redom sɔprɔpɔ no na sɔprɔpɔ redom supurupu* (As the turtle helps the *sɔprɔpɔ*, the *sɔprɔpɔ* helps the turtle). The turtle,

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known in Twi as *apowuru* or *osuhuru*, feeds on the fruit of the *sɔprɔɔ* plant. In doing so, it disperses the seeds, helping the plant spread across the forest floor. Both gain. Both give. Neither thrives alone.

The *sɔprɔɔ* plant, known scientifically as *Momordica foetida*, is a perennial climber. Its stems creep across the ground, taking root where the nodes touch soil, before spiralling up nearby foliage. You will find it on the margins of swamp and riverine forests, in open clearings, and on abandoned farmland.

Its value in traditional medicine is remarkable. The plant aids women in childbirth, stimulates menstruation, induces vomiting, and is believed to increase sexual desire. Young leaves are eaten to soothe stomach aches. The sap of the leaf is drunk for intestinal disorders, nosebleeds, and intense headaches. A leaf decoction is used to wash those suffering from smallpox.

If a cobra spits on you (and it does happen), you must act quickly. In the past, our forebears crushed the leaves of *sɔprɔɔ* in their hands and rubbed them directly on the site. It was believed to prevent inflammation. For an earache, the liquid from the crushed leaves is dropped into the ear. The root is a powerful purgative and is used against worms and constipation. When boiled with other medicinal plants, it treats boils and internal discomfort.

We benefit greatly from *sɔprɔɔ*. Should we not also be thankful to the turtle that spreads its seeds? There is a lesson here, one our ancestors knew and we are at risk of forgetting.

Yes, machines will almost certainly come. The arguments will speak of productivity, modernity, competitiveness. They will sound reasonable, even inevitable. And one by one, the communal labours will fall silent. Cocoa pods will still be cracked, but the talk, the laughter, the shared strength of village life, will disappear.

One day, our grandchildren may look back and wonder how we let it happen, how we threw away our collective soul in exchange for mechanical solitude. And by then, we may find that while the work still gets done, something far more precious has been lost.

Section E: Wisdom and Paradoxes

This part looks at the insightful lessons found in paradoxes and the lasting truth that withstands challenges. Whether it's acknowledging that no one can master everything or appreciating the paradox of slow and steady winning the race, these proverbs urge us to embrace life's uncertainties. The proverbs inspire a thoughtful approach to muddle through life's complexities, appreciating the paradoxes that shape our understanding of the world.

41. When the impossible isn't enough (anafranaku)

Some poisons in life don't shout. They grow silently in the shade, flower softly, and undo things that were never even possible to begin with. That's the idea an Akan proverb captures: *Anafranaku nsore bordee mma odwennini nwo abenasa* (*Anafranaku* doesn't grow under the plantain tree and permit a ram to bear triplets).

It is a strange saying, at first. Rams don't give birth. That much, even the dullest village boy like myself knows. But this isn't biology. It's irony. The proverb speaks of impossibility destroyed by absurdity. If something as odd as a ram giving birth to triplets were ever to happen, *anafranaku* would find a way to ruin it. It is *destructively present*.

Botanically named *Hillieria latifolia*, the plant grows like a whisper in the shade of cocoa trees and plantain stands. Its leaves are soft and fleshy, loved by caterpillars, goats and sheep. It bears elegant pink flowers on long stalks. Its folk medicinal uses are many. Boiled, it treats guinea worm. Its steam eases jaundice. Mixed with black pepper, it soothes swellings and skin disease. When pounded with creeping herbs, it is used for rheumatism, and in some homes, it is rubbed on tumours and inflamed breasts. The flowers, lovely to the eye, are said to help with asthma when taken with citrus juice. Even its seeds have culinary uses, fried with tortoise meat in some rural kitchens.

But here lies the trouble: the flowers and fruit of this plant are fatally toxic to sheep and goats, the very animals that most often graze under the shade of plan-

tain trees. So, while it offers help, it harbours death. The poison is selective. Subtle. It doesn't announce itself.

Which brings us back to the proverb. It is a warning. Some presences are so toxic, so ruinous, that even miracles would be undone by their company. Let us not be naïve. In every home, every organisation, there are *anafranaku spirits*, individuals that, though perhaps soft-spoken, poison potential at the root. They don't strike with swords. They don't rage or rant. They just *exist* in the wrong place, and by their presence, corrupt even the impossible.

I once knew a teacher who discouraged every talented student who passed through his hands. It was borne out of fear that a student's shine might cast his own dimness into view. He never raised his voice, never punished unfairly. He simply questioned their ambitions, poked holes in their dreams, and nodded in pleasure when they settled for less. Looking back, I now know what he was: *Anafranaku under the plantain tree*.

And perhaps you know such people too. Friends whose presence makes progress feel unnatural, or relationships in which every new idea dies. The problem isn't that they disagree with you. It's that something in their spirit can't tolerate success. They are allergic to growth. The tragedy is that they often hide in the shade, among what should be nourishing.

The proverb, then, is a call to remove them before they turn absurdity into tragedy. If even a ram, by some act of divine madness, were to bear triplets, *anafranaku* would still find a way to destroy them. That is the measure of its danger. Thus, in the *Ogyeboso* track, Daddy Lumba asks the *anafranaku* to go away to allow his sheep to give birth to triplets.

So, what do we do? Remove the plant, of course. But more than that, we must learn to name the poison in our lives, however medicinal it may appear in other contexts. Not everything with healing properties is meant to grow near you. Not every useful thing belongs in your field. Discernment is the rarest virtue; to know what heals and what hinders, and where each should grow.

In the end, life is about clearing the field, identifying what stunts the improbable beauty that wants to bloom in you. So, take stock of your inner plantation. Who grows under your canopy? What flowers where your fruit should be? For if you will not uproot *anafranaku*, then don't be surprised when even the impossible is never quite enough.

42. What you try to control controls you (amire)

In the year 1846, a Hungarian physician named Ignaz Semmelweis made a startling discovery. He observed that when doctors washed their hands regularly, the number of women dying after childbirth fell dramatically. In a maternity ward ravaged by infection, this was nothing short of miraculous.

But when Semmelweis urged his colleagues to adopt handwashing as a standard practice, they scoffed. For if he were right, then they were killing their own patients. They couldn't stomach the idea. They rejected him. Semmelweis lost his job, was labelled insane, and died in an asylum. Ironically, he succumbed to *sepsis*, a fatal complication of infection, the very condition he had laboured to prevent. He died believing himself a failure. But he was right. Some twenty years later, the German microbiologist Robert Koch would confirm the germ theory of disease, vindicating Semmelweis far too late.

There is a tragic irony in Semmelweis's story: the very thing he tried to control came to define, and ultimately destroy, him. To stand for something is noble, but it also leaves you exposed. My ancestors captured this tension in a proverb about the *amire* tree: *Amire kum kuro, na ekuro ku no* (While shingle wood has healing properties for sores, it succumbs to death from the same sores).

The *amire* (sometimes spelt *emire*), known in English as black afara or shingle wood (*Terminalia ivorensis*), is a tree with potent medicinal value. Its dark bark, etched with long cracks, is highly sought after by herbalists. A decoction from its bark soothes sores, and the powdered bark is sprinkled on ulcerated wounds. But this very usefulness is its undoing. The more it heals, the more its

bark is stripped, and without bark, the tree cannot survive. The healer is wounded by the wound it cures.

The analogy stretches further. Think of Marie Curie, the physicist who pioneered research into radioactivity. Her discoveries changed the world, and yet she died from the radiation she studied. What she mastered intellectually came to overpower her physically.

Beyond its medicinal uses, *amire* has many other virtues. The leaves are applied to cuts and added to bark infusions to treat malaria, gonorrhoea, muscular pain, rheumatism, and kidney problems. It is said to possess aphrodisiac properties. The tree also provides a red-yellow dye, and its wood is prized for practical use: the *sapwood* is pale and smooth, while the *heartwood* is darker, sturdier, and ideal for furniture, roofing shingles, doors, and window frames. Easy to work with, resistant to fungus and insects, it also serves as excellent fuel and charcoal. It is even used as a shade tree on cocoa and coffee plantations.

Yet the heartwood's quality deteriorates with age. Even the core is not immune to loss. In this, the proverb's wisdom deepens: the centre of strength may still weaken, the vessel of healing may itself be spent.

And so we return to Semmelweis. There is a further twist to his story, one many of us recognise in ourselves. Have you noticed that people often struggle with the very faults they denounce in others? The preacher of peace may be wracked by fury. The moralist who rails against temptation may quietly drown in it. It is not hypocrisy, not always. It is a deep truth that what we resist often resists us, and what we try hardest to master may master us. Most preachers preach to themselves.

The tree that heals dies healing. The man who cleansed others died of what he tried to cleanse. The deeper lesson is humility, not despair. We are not always in control. And perhaps that is the very place where virtue begins, when we realise that control is not the same as courage, and strength lies in knowing what may one day undo us.

43. If nudity promises you a cloth (ɔdan)

There is a well-known Akan proverb: *Kwerekwa se ɔbema wo ntoma a, tie ne din* (If nudity promises you a cloth, listen to his name). One need not be a philosopher to grasp the warning here. If a man who wears no garment speaks of providing one for you, it is prudent to wonder whether he has the means to fulfil his offer. A name, after all, may tell you more than the promise itself.

We are asked to attend to the giver, to consider character, history, and likelihood. If, for instance, the president in Nigeria assures you he will cleanse your land of corruption, you might be forgiven for treating his vow with some suspicion. Better to examine who is speaking, and what manner of life has earned him the platform from which he makes his claims.

There is, however, a counterpoint in Akan wisdom: *ɔdanwoma/ɔdan si afuo so a, wnnu abe ngu awaworata* (If *ɔdan* stands on a farm, we don't leave harvested palm nuts in the open). In other words, when shelter is graciously provided, there is no need to leave your goods exposed to ruin.

The tree known as *ɔdanwoma/ɔdan* (*Piptadeniastrum africanum*) is remarkable in its own right. Its name in Twi means “room,” a reference to the vast, gnarled buttresses that extend from its base and create a kind of natural alcove. This architecture hasn't gone unnoticed by farmers, who often store their harvest beneath it, knowing full well that unguarded palm nuts attract unwelcome guests – rats, most of all.

Tall and lofty, *ɔdan* rises among both deciduous and evergreen forests, its slender leaves giving way to an abundance of yellowish-brown flowers, clustered

thickly at the tips of its branches. Its wood, hard and durable, ranges from pinkish-grey in the sap to deep brown in the heart (reminiscent of odum, and no less valued). Carpenters prize it; soap makers find use for the ashes of its bark and pods.

In traditional medicine, it is a genuine apothecary. The bark is said to hold abortive properties, while decoctions have been taken internally to treat coughs, stomach aches, and difficulties of the reproductive and urinary systems. A paste might be applied to banish fleas or ease a fever. The roots, too, have been employed to treat afflictions of the mind and stir the passions of the body. Those with a more technical interest are invited to consult the *Useful Tropical Plants* database.

Curiously, even when the forests around them are cleared, *ɔdan* trees are often spared, their buttresses continuing to serve as a farmer's storeroom. And perhaps that, in the end, is the point. Some make empty promises, and some provide silently, steadily, as a tree shelters your goods from ruin. Learn to tell them apart. When fortune sets such a tree in your field, don't leave your palm nuts out in the sun. Use what is given. It is no shame to accept help that is real.

44. Slow and steady wins the race (Okanto)

It is a curious fact, and not a secret one, that across the world, women tend to outlive men. This has held true in the annals of my own family. Both my grandmothers lived to see their hundredth year, yet I never met either of my grandfathers. The pattern repeats: my children know their grannies, but not their grandpas.

Science has, of course, offered its explanations. One theory points to biology. Testosterone, so they tell us, gives men the early advantage: strength, vigour, a flair for risk. Yet it extracts a price later. There was a study, rather unsettling in its implications, which found that males castrated before the age of fifteen were over a hundred times more likely to reach their centenary than their intact peers. What one gains in manliness, it seems, one loses in mileage.

Now, I don't imagine our ancestors knew what we might call the *gonadal hypothesis*, but they certainly knew that men had a habit of dying early. One proverb puts it plainly: *Wonkum mmarima a, womfa mmaa* (If you have not killed the men, you don't carry off the women). Warfare alone, to say nothing of bravado and bad choices, sent many a man to an early grave.

Yet in a turn that bears the stamp of folk wisdom's love for paradox, the Akans chose a male-named plant to symbolise strength and longevity. *Okantogyasi mpa mono* (The Candlewood tree is always fresh). *Okanto* (*Zanthoxylum zanthoxyloides*) is a small tree, but don't let that mislead you. Its thorns, hooked and watchful, bristle along the branches with the sort of tenacity that discourages interference. There are two main kinds. One, with red twigs and thorns, is called

skanto-gyasi; the other, clad in pale bark, goes by *skwanto-kwaa*. The distinction is more than botanical. *Gyasi* is masculine; *kwaa*, feminine. And yet it is the male-named version that we associate with endurance.

Why not the feminine, if women live longer? The answer, like many wise things, lies in the practical. In the days of hand-woven clothes, garments could stiffen after washing. People would soften them by beating them between two pieces of *skanto* wood (one large, one small). Despite this repeated punishment, the *skanto-gyasi* remained sturdy and unbowed. Thus, the proverb praises what does not wear out, what endures hardship and emerges whole.

Its usefulness extended beyond the laundry. The tree's gum ignites easily, and its wood, hence known as Candlewood, makes excellent torches. During festivals, young people would carry them alight, flames swaying in the dark as they marched. The wood is hard, termite-resistant, and burns well, a blessing to both the builder and the cook.

As is often the case with forest trees, *skanto* has been a friend to the sick as well. The bark, when boiled, makes a rinse for toothaches. The twigs, chewed or rubbed on teeth, strengthen the gums. Bark can be pounded into poultices for swellings, and roots mixed into potions to treat paralysis. The leaves, steeped and drunk, may chase off fever or act as a purgative. Even the seeds have their uses, such as a fiery condiment like pepper.

And there is more. If a woman, newly delivered of her child, suffers internal pain, the root bark steeped in rum is said to bring swift relief – *tatahwe!* One might even jest that in this case, *gyasi* does a better job than *kwaa*. But such teasing is best kept light, for the gendered triumphs of plants do not always map neatly onto human rivalry.

Men may be tempted to say they provide women with the peaceful conditions in which to grow old. Women, understandably, may see the matter from a different angle. Still, whether we measure strength by how long one lives or how well one endures, the lesson remains: it is not the flash of youth or the glamour of fire that endures, but the tree that stays fresh after the beating.

And so we say, rightly and without shame, that slow and steady wins the race.

45. Deceitful tears deceive the crier (ɔkatakɪ)

I once had a tailor in Sunyani whose craft could rival the finest. The cut was sharp, the fit immaculate, and his eye for detail never failed. But alas, he had one fatal flaw: he could not keep time. If he promised your outfit by Friday evening for a Saturday event, you would be wise to begin considering alternatives. For it was common for him to start cutting the fabric only when he saw you arrive.

In the end, I found another because trust, like oxygen, is essential. No matter how skilled you are, if people can't count on you, they will quietly slip away. In both business and personal relationships, this intangible asset called trust is the coin of highest value. The accountants may call it goodwill, but it is better understood as faith made visible.

Sadly, many of us have become experts in sacrificing the long game for immediate gain. We cheat, cut corners, and deceive, and often convince ourselves that these are clever tactics rather than moral failures. But our elders knew better. One proverb cautions: *Obi nkɔte bese kyem mfra besetorɔ nkɔtɔn mma ne manni* (One does not mix red kola nuts with false ones to sell to the townspeople). The meaning is clear. Deceit may bring you a profit today, but you may lose your customer forever.

This failure of trust seeps even into small businesses. Employees, instead of tending the venture they are paid to help grow, may siphon off clients or even set up rival firms. We are so fixated on the short-term that we are blind to the bridges we burn. Trust, once broken, is not easily mended.

Take, for example, the plant *ɔkatakɪ*, also known as *ɔkatanini agyaben* (*Leea*

guineensis). It is renowned for its medicinal powers, yet ironically stands as a symbol of unreliability. A well-known proverb laments: *Ɔkatanini agyaben, ɔnni mfofo mu, na ɔnni kwace mu, na yepe no be a na yehu no* (The plant *Leea guineensis* is neither in the plains nor in the forest; where then shall we find it)? Though it holds great promise, one cannot reliably find it when it is most needed. Just like the tailor, it has the power to help but refuses to appear on time.

The plant itself is modest in stature, a shrub with decorative flair. Its flowers are small and orange, its fruits red before ripening into a deep purple-black. When snapped, it exudes a watery sap. Its seeds, roots and leaves are rich in healing properties. It treats swelling in the groin (*same*), toothache, venereal diseases, fever, indigestion and even epileptic fits. Its concoctions are many, but the challenge is the same: good luck finding it when urgency knocks.

This unreliability is more than a botanical inconvenience. It frustrates because human beings are creatures of habit. We thrive on patterns, on the assurance that what served us yesterday will be there again today. I can tap out my bank password on my phone with ease, but place me before a computer keyboard and I draw a blank. Reliability smooths the day; its absence adds friction and fatigue.

When something or someone becomes unpredictable, it unsettles the rhythm of our lives. That is why we find it hard to forgive chronic lateness, unreturned calls or promises unfulfilled. *Ɔkatakyi* may be curative, but its unpredictability turns it into a metaphor for the loss of peace of mind.

Let us bring this closer to home, to a problem that afflicts many Ghanaians: unemployment. Since 2012, I have known people who completed their National Service and have never held meaningful work since. It is easy to point at government policies or economic indicators, and surely they bear scrutiny. But could the root of the problem be deeper, closer, more personal?

Investor confidence is not built solely on GDP figures, inflation rates or even political stability. Those are important, but what good are they if an investor can't trust the people he must hire? Suppose a Ghanaian living abroad wishes to open a business back home, something small enough to employ three or four people. A crucial question will be: Can I trust those I employ? If the answer is no, the venture will never begin. The money stays in the bank, and the jobs are never created.

Small and medium-sized enterprises are the lifeblood of any economy. They flourish best in environments rich in honesty and dependability. Without these, even the warmest hospitality and the lowest inflation can't compensate. Trust is the seed from which commerce grows.

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If we become a people known for integrity, for reliability, for keeping our word, we shall see a revolution. Investments will multiply. Capital will shift from treasury bills to tractors, from bonds to bakeries. Jobs will be created by the confidence that one's neighbour will do what he promised.

After all, what use is a medicine chest if the medicine cannot be found? *Okatakyi* may heal, but only if it shows up.

46. Ignored until they need you (ɔnwamma)

In the Akan language, Twi, there is a term for an old, shortened broom: *praye-tia*. Once it swept the smooth floors of bedrooms, fresh and long, its fibres gentle and clean. But time has a way of changing both tools and people. As the bristles shrink and stiffen, the broom's purpose shifts. No longer is it brought out for respectable surfaces. It is banished to the corners of the compound (*mantwea*), remembered only when something particularly unpleasant needs cleaning: chicken droppings, algae on stone, the business no one else wants to do.

And so, *praye-tia* becomes a metaphor. Some people are like that broom. They are useful, but only in a crisis. Overlooked in normal times, they are summoned when the work is hard and dirty. If you ask them, they may simply say, "I am *praye-tia*: good for nothing until the filth shows up."

There is another proverb that voices the same frustration, though more colourfully: *M'aye ɔnwamma, wose menyɛ nso sɛ metɔ a, na mmoa rebewe* (I am like the *ɔnwamma* tree. You say I am no good, but when my seeds fall, the animals will eat them). Here is a cry of overlooked value.

The *ɔnwamma* tree, known to botanists as *Ricinodendron heudelotii*, is not what one might call stately. It grows fast, with only modest buttresses, and its wood is soft, brittle and short-lived. The leaves are hairy in youth, and yellow flowers appear in season. It does not boast the hardwood glory of mahogany or the fragrant nobility of cedar. As a result, it is easily dismissed.

But how often do we misjudge? The very fruit of this undervalued tree is treasured by forest animals, so much so that hunters pitch camp beneath its

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branches, waiting patiently for the opportunity to shoot. The fruit, with its three compartments each housing a seed, also feeds culture. The seeds become counters for games and rattles for play.

In cocoa farms, *ɲwamma* is often spared. Its leaves make rich litter, and its shade is kind. There is even a belief, not lightly held, that cutting it down may cause the cocoa roots nearby to rot and die, a condition known as collar crack. This belief, whether scientific or not, reflects a deep folk intuition: some things, though humble, are essential.

Medicinally, the tree is a powerhouse. Its root bark, mixed with pepper and salt, treats constipation. A decoction cures dysentery. The bark is employed against elephantiasis, eases fevers, enhances fertility and helps with labour pains. It is even regarded as an antidote for poison. Old leaves are turned into bowls and spoons. The wood, though fragile, is perfect for carving stools and household tools.

Still, despite all this, *ɲwamma* is rarely spoken of with esteem. It is passed over, then remembered only in a moment of need. This, of course, reflects more than just the fate of a tree. It echoes something deeply human. Philosophers speak of two kinds of respect. One is *recognition respect*, the honour we owe to others simply because they are human. The other is *appraisal respect*, which we grant in response to excellence or merit.

The first is universal. Every person is entitled to it. When it is denied, it wounds deeply. To be treated as less than human, to be overlooked, dismissed or despised hurts and distorts. Many who are denied this respect eventually rise to reclaim it. When they do, those who denied it may call them names. Yet the real shame lies in the injustice that provoked it.

The second kind of respect, appraisal, must be earned. We speak of Einstein as a respected scientist because of his contributions to knowledge. But even Einstein, for all his brilliance, was owed the first kind of respect long before the second came into view.

ɲwamma may not look like much. But it is useful, generous, and life-giving. It shouldn't be honoured only when the seeds fall. Its worth is not in crisis alone. And so with people. We must learn to see each other as worthy always. Where respect is lacking, discord follows. Where it is given freely, consistently, and fairly, there is peace.

47. Even the wise bear scars (ɔtannuro)

If you were to search for *Trichilia monadelpha* on Google Scholar, you would uncover over 500 scholarly entries. That is no small feat for a tree native to tropical Africa. Scholars, it seems, have found in it a worthy subject, and for good reason.

Much of the interest lies in its medicinal power. Herbalists have long prized the stem bark, using it to treat coughs, nausea, stomach aches, and venereal diseases. The bark may also bring on labour, relieve pain, expel intestinal worms, induce abortion, and rouse the embers of desire. Its Twi name, *ɔtannuro*, combines *ɔtan* (to hate) with *aduro* (medicine). The bitterness is such that one dreads the dose even as one acknowledges its cure. It is a medicine you hate to love, or perhaps love to hate.

The tree itself is handsome and useful. It flourishes in moist places, reaching heights of some 18 metres, with a straight trunk and a wide crown. The sapwood is white, the heartwood a rich reddish brown. It is a hard timber, fit for construction, firewood, and charcoal. Its twigs serve as chew sticks, an old and effective method for cleaning the teeth.

In southern Ghana, farmers usually plant maize twice each year. The first sowing comes with the April rains, the second, in August, as the rains return after a customary dry spell between July and August, known as *fupɛbere*. As this dry period draws to an end, the flowering of *ɔtannuro* offers a signal. The rains are returning. It is time to plant again.

Birds, too, take notice of the tree. The casqued hornbill, known as *ɔnwam*, is

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especially fond of its fruit. Yet here lies a puzzle. Though *stannuro* is used to treat skin infections like ulcers and yaws, the hornbill that feeds upon its fruit has a patch of rough skin on its head.

The Akans put it more memorably: *Onwam kesebirekuo ata se ɔrenya obi ama wakaka akyerɛ Aberewa se ɔnnɔyɛ tannuro ho wawawee, na ɔno a ɔdi n'aba mpo kokoram atɔ ne tirim* (The yellow-casqued hornbill says he wishes someone would tell the old woman to stop scraping the bark of the *stannuro* tree, for even he, who eats its fruit, bears scrofula upon his head). The moral is not lost on a thoughtful reader. If the seasoned falter, what hope for the beginner? If the man lying on his back can't see heaven, how shall the one who lies face down?

There is still more to say about *stannuro*. Beyond medicine, it serves the land itself. The tree nourishes and protects the soil. For this reason, farmers often spare it when clearing forest land. Its value is recognised even in its absence. And so another proverb is spoken: *Stannuro Abena, m'afe kyiri me* (The *stannuro* says, my peers detest me). In the world of plants, as in the world of men, ability provokes envy. Excellence isolates. Yet one must remain true. You can't live to please all.

48. Not all abundance leads to growth (ɛmoo)

In 2003, a Ghanaian court handed down prison sentences to three former appointees of the Jerry Rawlings administration for their role in what became known as the Quality Grain Scandal. Those convicted were Kwame Peprah, former Finance Minister; Ibrahim Adam, former Minister for Agriculture; and Dr George Sipah Adja-Yankey, a former official in the Ministry of Finance. Their offence was causing financial loss to the state.

The scandal revolved around a fraudulent scheme led by an American woman, Juliet Cotton, who succeeded in swindling the Ghanaian government out of some twenty million dollars. Her deception concerned a proposed partnership to develop a rice production project in Aveyime, a site selected for its proximity to the Volta River.

This location was not chosen by accident. Rice is a crop that hungers for water. It grows best in flooded fields and depends on a steady supply of moisture. The link between rice and water is well established in our farming practices. Yet here lies a paradox. If rice thrives in water, why doesn't it grow well in the sea? How can a crop so bound to water wither when offered an abundance of it?

Our elders have captured this contradiction in a proverb: *Emoo se ɲɛ nsuo dodoɔ nanso ɲɛ dua no po ani a enye yie* (Rice prefers lots of water to flourish, but cannot thrive in the vast expanse of the sea). The saying draws attention to the limits of good things. Rice needs water, but not all water is suitable. When planted in the sea, it fails, for the sea does not offer the precise conditions it

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requires. This is a lesson in environment and proportion. Not all abundance leads to growth. Not every setting is fertile, however promising it may appear.

In the same way, people must be careful to match their efforts with the realities around them. Ambition is not enough. Success often depends on whether your aspirations are suited to the soil in which you're planted.

Harvesting rice begins when the grains are fully mature and the green fields have turned a rich golden colour. I remember helping a rice farmer during one such harvest in my childhood. He allowed me to keep what I had gathered. I separated the grain from the straw and chaff, first by beating the sack with a stick, and then by pounding the contents in a mortar with a pestle.

At the time, eating rice was a rare pleasure. Today, it has become commonplace. That, too, is a kind of paradox. Not long ago, Ghana's staple foods were cassava, yam and maize. Rice was not grown extensively, and most of it was imported. This made it both more expensive and less accessible than the local staples. Yet now, rice has become a staple itself.

Even this shift serves as a reminder. What was once rare can become familiar. What once seemed distant can come home. But none of this alters the truth captured in the proverb. Rice may love water, but it cannot live in the sea. I first heard this proverb in Daddy Lumba's song, *Anidasoɔ wɔ hɔ ma obiara* (Hope abounds for everyone).

49. Greatness is not by size (nkrangyedua)

Towards the end of President John Kufuor's administration in the late 2000s, a great deal of attention was given to the potential of physic nut plantations, known to scientists as *Jatropha curcas*. The aim, if memory serves, was to produce biodiesel from its seeds. Onua Amoah and Professor Kwabena Frimpong-Boateng, then aspiring to lead the New Patriotic Party, were among its early advocates. Much was promised. Now, little is heard of the project, and one wonders what became of it.

Yet the plant itself has long been familiar in Ghana. Though not native, it has been planted across the country for decades, particularly as hedges and boundary fences. In Twi, it is called *nkrangyedua*, the "Accra gyedua," perhaps in reference to where its presence became widespread. As children, we took great delight in its soapy sap, using it to blow bubbles. That same sap was believed to stop bleeding, though we were sternly warned to keep it far from our eyes.

The uses of the plant are varied. Crushed leaves in water were used as enemas. The young leaves, boiled into a bitter liquor, were taken to reduce fevers. For guinea worms, the leaves were burned and the ashes applied to force the parasites out quickly. The seeds, potent in their own way, acted as a strong laxative. Dried and crushed, they could be mixed with burnt plantain peel to make soap. Pressed onto a stick dipped in palm oil, they served as torches that no wind could extinguish.

Though common today, the physic nut didn't originate here. It came from

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South America, introduced by the Portuguese and the Dutch. Our elders, in their wisdom, remind us of this with a proverb: *Ɔsena firiiɛ ansa na nkrangyedua rebe-firi* (The velvet tamarind had grown before the physic nut began to grow). That is to say, seniority is not measured by size or popularity, but by place and time. The physic nut may be taller and more visible, but the velvet tamarind was here first.

The *sena*, also known as *Dialium guineense* to botanists, is a native of our forests. It is a modest tree with smooth, glossy leaves. Among the Ewe, it is called *atsitoe*; in Ga, *yoyi*. The Akans have many names for it. The Akyem say *sena fufuo*, the Fante *esinam*, and the Asante/Bono simply *sena*.



Nkrangyedua - Jatropha curcas

Its fruit is perhaps its most beloved feature. Encased in black, velvety shells, the yellow pulp is sweet and refreshing. When thirsty, few things satisfy more. The seeds can also be soaked in water and drunk like a mild beverage.

Beyond its fruit, the tree has other uses. It provides excellent firewood, and the gum from its trunk burns freely. Blacksmiths favour its charcoal, and the branches are fashioned into *wɔma*, pestles used for pounding *fufuo*. This alone is a sign that the plant is safe for domestic use. In traditional medicine, the bark is

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boiled and the liquid used to soothe sore throats, toothaches, and mouth sores. The root bark is also valued, particularly in treating coughs.

So it is that the small, quiet *nsena* speaks to us still. It may not tower over fences like the physic nut, nor attract presidential manifestos, but it has endured. It was here before, and it will likely remain – if we take care of it. The proverb is plain in its teaching. Greatness is not always found in size. Nor does visibility guarantee worth. Some things, like the velvet tamarind, are essential.

50. The water that boils but does not burn (adwera)

You may already know *adwera* as an Adinkra symbol, representing purity, sanctity, chastity, good fortune, consecration and cleanliness. Known in botanical terms as *Portulaca oleracea*, *adwera* (purslane, in English) is a succulent plant of deep religious significance among the Akans, where it bears the noble title, the “water of life.”

Our elders speak of it with a proverb that sounds as though it were drawn from a holy book: *Adwera nsuo, wo ne nkwansuo, nsu korogyenn a wohuru nso wonhye* (Adwera water, water of life, the clean water that boils but does not burn). It is a remarkable thought. What kind of water can come to a boil without scorching? Here is purity that can endure fire.

The plant itself is modest in appearance. Its leaves are thick and rounded, and it bears small yellow flowers. But appearances deceive. This humble herb has long been central to rites of purification. As T. E. Kyei recounts in his book *Marriage and Divorce Among the Asante*, there was a time when *adwera* was indispensable in annual ceremonies to cleanse one’s *okra* (the soul). On such a day, a person would take several white fowls, chosen for their spotless feathers, place them in a metal basin, and proceed to the river.

There, the leaves of *adwera* would be dipped in the flowing water and sprinkled over the birds. The supplicant would speak to the fowls, asking for blessing, health and prosperity. On returning home, the fowls were sacrificed, and their blood was sprinkled around the home. The guests would then share a meal of the

meat served with mashed yam, prepared without oil so that it, too, appeared white. All of it was designed to echo the plant's essential virtue: purity.

In widowhood rites, *adwera* again played a central role. On the ninth day after a spouse's death, the bereaved would carry a basin filled with stream-sand and *adwera* leaves, going from house to house to thank those who had offered support. At each door, some of the mixture would be left behind. The widow or widower, dressed in white calico cloth (*nwera*), would thereby bring the mourning period to a close in a ritual of gratitude and release.

During puberty rites, *bragorɔ*, the plant served another purpose. As the girl sat with a brass basin by her feet, filled with water and *adwera* leaves, elders and family friends would present her with gifts of money. Before each coin or note was added to the basin, it was sprinkled with water from the *adwera*, purifying it. This was no mere formality. The sum collected became her *dwetire*, meant to serve her in future ventures. Even wealth, it seemed, required cleansing before it could be of use.

The virtues of *adwera* are not confined to Ghana. In ancient Greece, Pliny the Elder recommended it as a protective charm against evil. Back in Ghana, the plant has long been seen as an emblem of peace. Its leaves were mixed with oil and applied to the body to ward off malevolent spirits. Ground and applied to boils, the plant would draw them to a head. Soothing and steadfast, it has always been a healer's ally.

Its use in food is equally notable. The leaves can be cooked like spinach. When eaten with tiger nuts, they are said to relieve skin ailments. When soaked in cold water and drunk regularly, they serve as a tonic for the heart. Purslane is rich in vitamins, calcium and natural antibiotics. Still, like all potent things, it demands wisdom. It should not be taken medicinally during pregnancy.

Though its religious uses may have faded from common practice, *adwera* remains a plant of great value. It is a companion in the home and the garden, bearing within it a history of cleansing, healing, and strength. Purity is not weakness, and true power often appears unassuming.

It is, after all, the water that boils but does not burn.

Section F: Challenges and Resilience

In this section, we confront the inevitable challenges of life and embrace the resilience needed to overcome adversity. From the uncertainties of the future to the pitfalls of condescension, these essays explore the delicate dance between individuality and collective harmony.

51. Learning from a drowning man (osisire)

In the rough world of village boyhood, where weeding, hunting, and barefoot football often took place on sun-baked, unforgiving ground, wounds and sores were expected companions. And how did we tend to these wounds? The leaves of *pepeadiawuo** (*Datura metel*) were crushed, and the juice was squeezed directly into the wound. Bleeding ceased almost at once. A day later, a warm, wet cloth would be placed over the sore in hopes of coaxing it towards healing.

But once a sore takes up residence on your skin, another guest soon follows – the housefly. It becomes a near-constant companion, attracted by what it finds irresistible. There is, therefore, an Akan proverb which goes, *Ekuro ntuu wo a, wose anwansena ne wo ka* (If you don't have a sore, you may think the housefly likes you). The lesson here is that true loyalty is seldom tested in times of ease. Those who flutter about in our sunshine may not stand with us in the storm.

The housefly may irritate, of course, but even here, wisdom advises restraint. As the elders put it, *Wofa nwansena ho abofu a, wobere wo kuro* (If you grow angry with the fly, your sore reopens). In other words, provocation is no excuse for folly. A rash reaction may worsen what patience would have preserved.

Then there is the fool, who, having felt his pain subside for a while, declares himself whole. *Kwasea kuro tutu no na egyae no tutuo a, ɔse awu* (If the pain in his

* The name means 'Northerner chew and die' because those from the northern Ghana (called *pepefo*) who came to the south sometimes mistook it for another plant (*awonyon*; *Vernonia amygdalina*), which sick people chewed to restore their appetite. Since this one is poisonous, it sometimes caused death.

sore lessens, a fool thinks he is healed). Here, too, lies a lesson. Relief is not recovery. One must be wary of mistaking a lull in suffering for the end of it. And there is yet another proverb, perhaps my favourite: *Ekuro bɔn abusua an entutu abusua* (Though the family shares the stench of the sore, only you feel its pain). A sobering truth. Crime, like a festering wound, may scandalise the household, but its deepest toll is personal. No one else bears your punishment.

Though many plants were pressed into service to heal sores, the bark of the *osisire* or *koko-nisuo* tree (known to botanists as *Spathodea campanulata*) was widely respected for its effectiveness. The tree itself is a handsome, medium-sized specimen with a thick, rounded canopy. Its young buds are brimming with water, which we mischievously squirted into one another's eyes as children, provoking much laughter and many tears. The bark, when boiled, produced a tonic believed to ease constipation and other belly troubles. And to the farmer, its bright, trumpet-like blossoms signalled that it is time to plant the maize.

During the dusty Harmattan season, when streams dry up and thirst makes beasts bold, hunters concocted a poison from the hardened core of its fruit. Left in the bush, the brew lured thirsty animals to drink and die. The catch, though deadly, had to be eaten swiftly and without its entrails.

Yet for all its uses, the *osisire* is no panacea. There is a saying: *Enye osisire na ebetumi akisikuro* (It is not the African tulip tree that can cure chronic sores). Here, *akisikuro* refers to a sore so stubborn that months pass without healing. The proverb is not about medicine, really, but about adequacy. The wood of the *osisire* is so poor that it cannot heat a pot of water for someone seeking relief for *akisikuro*. So too, in the world of debt and hardship, a small sum in the hands of a highly indebted poor person is not a solution. It is barely a beginning. The proverb cautions against misplaced hope in insufficient help.

Moreover, the *osisire* is not built to endure storms. Its trunk often hollows with age, its branches overreach, and the wind finds it easy prey. Still, a final proverb warns: *Osisire ntutu nktwere nwamma* (The tulip tree does not get uprooted only to lean against the *nwamma*). As we saw earlier, the *nwamma* (*Ricinodendron heudelotii*, see page 157) is even more brittle than the *osisire*. If one weak thing leans upon another, collapse is near certain. It is folly to seek strength from the weak.

52. Sickness arrives fast, recovery falters (babadua)

Enlightenment thinkers of Europe wrestled with what they termed “the problem of evil”. My Akan ancestors wrestled with it too. But there was a difference in the method of record. While the Europeans wrote their ideas in weighty volumes and ponderous essays, my forebears, though illiterate by modern reckoning, left behind their wisdom in proverbs, distilled reflections uttered at the riverside, under the moon, or with a calabash of palm wine in hand.

Consider this Akan saying: *Yaree reba a, enam sibire ho, ereko dee a, enam babadua ho* (When sickness comes, it travels on the reed, but when it leaves, it goes on the babadua). The imagery may be rustic, but the insight is profound. Let us unpack it.

The *sibire* (*Schumannianthus dichotomus*) is a reed-like plant with upright, dark green stems, smooth to the touch and flourishing in swampy places. The *babadua* (*Thalia geniculata*), on the other hand, is a broad-leaved, somewhat straggling shrub bearing pinkish-purple flowers and triangular fruit that blacken when ripe. Though both are found in similar environments and share certain uses (in basketry, mat-making, furniture and more), there is a vital difference. The stem of the *sibire* is as smooth as a polished floor. Run your hand along it and feel no interruption. But the *babadua* has swollen joints. Touch it, and you are halted again and again, like a driver meeting a string of red lights on a busy street.

The proverb draws upon this contrast. Illness comes swiftly, gliding in on the sleek reed. Recovery, though, falters. It hesitates. It must navigate the jointed

stem of *babadua*, stuttering with effort. Anyone who has fallen ill knows this truth. Think of how suddenly COVID-19 spread across the globe, and how slowly we clawed our way back to normal life.

Yet the proverb points beyond physical sickness. It speaks of evil more broadly. Trouble, loss, shame, sorrow; these descend in haste, but depart at a crawl. The Ga people say it too: *Obia gbii fa fe ahonya gbii* (The days of poverty are more than the days of abundance).

Now consider this same theme in the musings of European philosophers. In 1697, Pierre Bayle published his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*. He argued, with courage and controversy, that perhaps the world is the battleground of two powers (good and evil) and that evil appears to hold the upper hand. Pain, he insisted, cuts deeper than pleasure. A single hour of toothache outweighs a week of feasting.

Such a view was unpalatable to many. Leibniz responded in 1710 with his *Theodicy*, arguing that this world, despite its trials, is “the best of all possible worlds” crafted by a benevolent God. What seems evil, in his view, is part of a larger good. A child’s teething pain is a small price for adult teeth. Leibniz’s ideas were warmly embraced by Alexander Pope, who penned in 1733: *Whatever is, is right*.

Voltaire at first agreed, but Lisbon changed him. When the city was shattered by an earthquake in 1755, killing thousands, he recoiled from Leibniz’s tidy optimism. In his poem on the disaster, Voltaire asked how a just God could permit such suffering. Rousseau, never one to remain silent, replied: the problem, he said, is not God but man. It was not the Creator who built high-rises on a fault line. Had people lived more modestly, the death toll might have been less.

And yet the debate went on. Voltaire responded with satire, *Candide* in 1759, a scathing portrayal of Leibnizian optimism. Pain and folly, in Voltaire’s tale, are not steps on a path to some distant good. They are wounds that bleed.

Today, these names (Bayle, Leibniz, Pope, Voltaire, Rousseau) line the shelves of Western libraries. Their thoughts on evil and suffering are studied, quoted and debated. Yet we, too, had our philosophers. They may not have published books, but they gave us proverbs. They, too, saw that evil arrives like a storm and departs like a dripping tap. They told us this with *sibire* and *babadua*, with plants growing by the riverside.

Now tell me, were they not philosophers?

53. Tomorrow is a mystery (kwadu)

A friend from Zimbabwe once expressed his surprise at the Ghanaian practice of cooking bananas. He found it comical, even slightly sacrilegious. I tried to explain, with all the patience I could muster, that what we cook is not the sweet, soft banana known across much of the world, but its stouter cousin, the plantain. They resemble one another, certainly, much as twins may at birth, but time quickly reveals the difference. Bananas may be eaten straight from the hand. Plantains, by contrast, are rarely served uncooked.

The plantain, called *borɔdeɛ* in Twi, tends to bear fewer fruits, yet each one is larger, with more space between. There exists a type so frugal in yield that its very name, *ekaamenko* (roughly, “left to me alone, your family would starve”), reflects a sort of botanical pessimism. It is a miserly tree, bearing so little that its fruit becomes a symbol of hardship.

The linguistic history is telling. The word *borɔdeɛ*, literally “European yam”, suggests an importation, a stranger adopted into our culinary home. The banana (*kwadu*), however, is native in habit, though humble in standing. It was rarely cultivated on farms, finding its place instead at the periphery, growing wild or marking the boundaries of land. Hence the proverb: *Dabi asem nti na yeto kwadu a yegyam ho* (We prune the banana not for today, but for some matter yet to come). We don’t know what tomorrow brings, so we spare the banana tree.

There is wisdom here. The banana, seemingly insignificant, propagates itself generously. Around its base sprout small suckers, ensuring its endurance from one season to the next. Because of this, bananas were used to demarcate land, a

living fence. Even in clearing the bush, one would take care to leave them intact. They might yet prove testimony in a future dispute.

The proverb *Wosum borɔdeɛ a, sum kwadu, na wonnim deɛ ekɔm ba a ebegye wo* (If you support the plantain under its heavy load, support the banana also, for you know not what hunger may come) is both agricultural advice and moral counsel. The lowly may yet rescue the great. It echoes Christ's caution that what is least among us may one day prove greatest.

Like bananas, the suckers of the plantain (*borɔdewa*) are transplanted, perpetuating the line. The fruit of the plantain, however, has distinguished itself in the Ghanaian kitchen in a hundred forms. *Ampesie*, the simple boiling of plantain, is often best done with *apem*, the smaller fingers. The larger *apantu* serve other ends: pounded into *fufuo* or mashed into *etɔ*. When roasted, the unripe plantain becomes *brɔdedwo*. The ripe, when roasted, transforms into that delightfully named street snack, *Kofi Broke Man*, to be eaten with roasted groundnuts and chewed with all the reverence your molars can muster.



Plantain bearing fruits

Yet the tale does not end at the pot. The plantain is an entire economy unto itself. The stalk, *borɔde-tire*, when beaten and mixed with charcoal, becomes a natural toothbrush. I can attest to its efficacy. Its fibres, *baha*, are a poor man's toilet roll, and have served generations, even receiving a nod in 1990s television

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advertising. The peels, *borɔde-hono*, when dried and burned, yield ash that is sifted and mixed with palm oil to make *amonkye*, a black soap. My mother used to make this type of soap, and I would sell it in the neighbourhood, carrying it in a pan on my beautiful head.

The leaves, broad and generous, are multipurpose: impromptu umbrellas in the rain, or rustic plates upon which boiled yams and plantain are served to farmhands. Once dried, they are wrappers for the delicacy known as *Fante dɔkono*.

Today, the banana may enjoy global popularity, with its sweetness enjoyed from Singapore to Stockholm. But in Ghana, the plantain reigns. Banana doesn't grace our pots. And if you have never enjoyed the many delights this humble fruit provides, then truly, you have not fully lived.

54. The leopard does not change its spots (odwuma)

In the past, when men went hunting in the deep places of the forest, they seldom troubled themselves with the weight of a water flask. This may sound foolhardy to the modern ear, yet it is not as rash as it appears. Nature, for all her wildness, has her provisions. There are rivers and streams, of course, but even these may grow scarce in the deeper stretches of bush. The wise hunter knows the forest keeps its gifts.

Among these is a curious tree, the *Musanga cecropioides*, known in Twi as *odwuma*. It is sometimes called the umbrella tree or African corkwood, but neither name quite captures its abundance. Its broad canopy forms from a multitude of branches that rise from stilt-like roots, propping the tree as if it were some great creature stepping across the forest floor. When its leaves fall, they decay into rich humus and give back to the earth more than they ever took. Yet for all its generosity, *odwuma* lives quickly. It grows in clusters, blooms with urgency, and dies before its time.

But while it lives, it nourishes. Hunters know how to cut the prop roots and draw forth water that is clear, odourless, and subtly sweet. It is not the sort of sweetness that flatters the tongue but rather one that quenches the throat and leaves the drinker restored. During times of drought, entire communities turn to this silent reservoir. Monkeys, too, have learned this secret, as though nature had whispered it to them long before men ever noticed. A single night may yield half a bucket of water.

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Even when rivers run full, the sap of *odwuma* isn't wasted. Boiled with maize, it is given to nursing mothers to increase their milk. Midwives, with the confidence born of generations, prepare a soup of its stipules (the small leaf-like growths at the base of the leaf) and offer it to women in labour. It is wisdom preserved in the rhythms of the village.

The tree yields even more. Fibre can be drawn from its bark, and the sheets are used to polish wood. Its light, spongy wood serves as cork, insulation, or modelling material. On Lake Bosomtwe, where tradition forbids the use of modern boats, it is *odwuma* that floats. The people craft *padua* (slender, rough-hewn floats from the logs). When more strength is needed, two or three are lashed together to form a *mpata*, bearing nets and men alike across the sacred waters.



Odwuma - Musanga cecropioides

Its fruit is no less generous. Birds flock to it, and mammals too, but it is the grey plantain-eater that seems most obsessed. So fervent is its love for the fruit that it has inspired a proverb: *Wokokyere obirebe ba fie na wowo bayere fufuo ma no ma sdi a, one odwuma aba* (Bring the grey plantain-eater home and feed it fufuo if you like, it will still excrete the seeds of the umbrella tree).

It is a vivid truth. A man may be clothed in fine things, fed at your table, even made to sit beside you in comfort, but if his nature is contrary, it will reassert itself in time. The Scriptures ask: *Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard*

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his spots? We know the answer. It is not cruelty to say so, nor cynicism. It is simply observation seasoned with experience.

Odwuma, then, is not just a tree. It is a lesson in the constancy of nature. Its fruits, fibres, and waters all serve; yet the bird returns to it as to an old vice. Man, too, has his patterns, and no amount of hospitality will undo a heart that is bent on its own course.

55. Never let a crisis go to waste (bayerɛ)

When you hear the word *Thanksgiving*, the mind often flies across the Atlantic to the Americas to turkeys and autumnal feasts. But gratitude for the harvest is no monopoly of New England. In Ghana, too, we give thanks, though our centrepiece is different. Yam is the king.

In the Volta Region, the people of Ho mark the *Asogli Yam Festival* in September. In Techiman, it is the *Fofie Yam Festival* in October. Elsewhere across the land, similar festivals take place, all paying homage to a single, sacred tuber: *bayerɛ*, the yam (*Dioscorea spp.*). It is more than food. It is the emblem of fertility, hard work, and providence. Where yam abounds, a people flourish.

A walk through the *bayerɛ adwasuo* (the yam section) of the Techiman market is a lesson in diversity. There is *afaseɛ*, the water yam, larger and heavier than its cousins due to its high-water content. It is usually left to dry for a while before being cooked, as one would let wet wood sit before placing it in a fire. Though not the finest of yams, it serves well enough when boiled for *ampesie*. Its flesh comes in hues of white, off-white, violet, or yellow.

Then comes *bayerɛ-pa*, which is a broad category, excluding both *afaseɛ* and *akwa*. These are the white yams, universally prized, especially for making *fufuo*. They have names known to yam connoisseurs: *pona*, *dokoben*, *teeda*, and *nanantɔ*. *Nanantɔ* is the king among them. The name means, “a stranger does not buy.” Sellers hoard it for those who know its worth, for in a world of appearances, *nanantɔ* does not draw attention to itself, but it never disappoints.

Akwa (yellow yam) also commands respect. Its tubers are good for pounding,

though its leaves are poisonous. Then there is *nkamfoɔ*, similar in colour but from another stock entirely (see page 354).

Other varieties carry their own tales. *Asɔɔbayere* (small, snow-white, and best roasted) is the kind that surprises by quality, not quantity. *Ahabayere*, the wild yam, defends itself with spiny roots and thorns. Its harvest is a battle, and so, when someone describes a task as arduous, they may say, *Enye ahabayere a aberewa dwɔɔ* (It is not as though an old woman is digging up wild yam). Which is to say: this will not be easy.

Then there is the curiously named *kookooase bayere* – the yam of the cocoa plantation. Its vines reach ever upward, perhaps dreaming of greatness. The tubers grow absurdly large, earning the nickname *toolege* in Berekum. But their size belies their inferiority. Compared to *bayere-pa*, they are all flourish and no substance, a warning against judging by bulk what should be evaluated by taste.

And yet, for all its renown as food, yam holds secrets few know, even among those who grow and eat it daily. In the 1930s, Japanese scientists discovered that certain species of yam contain a natural compound called *diosgenin*. This substance closely resembles *progesterone*, one of the principal female hormones. The discovery opened the door to an extraordinary possibility: by extracting *diosgenin* and chemically transforming it, scientists were able to produce synthetic *progesterone* and later *oestrogen*. This innovation led to the development of the first oral contraceptive pill. Until then, the production of such hormones had been prohibitively expensive. The yam, once again, proved itself a source not just of nourishment but of possibility. What began in a forest field or on the edge of a cocoa farm reshaped modern medicine.

Since yams sprout anew from the tubers themselves, they must be stored with care. Enter the *putuo*^{*}, the yam barn: a structure of vertical beams and cross-bars, shaded and ventilated to perfection. Each yam is tied gently to its beam, so it breathes, ages, and waits. A well-built *putuo* is the farmer's pride. But the structure is prone to fire. A single spark can ignite the thatched roof, and the shed becomes an oven. The yams roast.

Now, this is no one's plan. But when it happens, as it sometimes does, the people gather. They feast. What was meant for storage becomes a shared meal. It is from this reality that the proverb springs: *Obi nka se putuo nhye ma yenni dwo. Nanso putuo hye a yebebu bayere no bi adi* (No one prays for the yam shed to

* Some people, including my Facebook friend Batama Kwasi Kingkong, swear the word is *puduo*. While *puduo* is a generic word for heaped items, I know that the structure I have described above is *putuo*. This is from a lived experience, not read from a book.

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burn. But if it does, we shall help ourselves to roasted yam). Disaster, when unavoidable, may yet become a blessing; don't let it go to waste.

There is a certain man who once visited Techiman. Upon returning, he could not contain his admiration for the beauty of the women. Bursting with excitement, he began to confide in a friend: '*Asuo, mese, Techiman paa mmaa...*' (I tell you, Techiman has beautiful ...). But before he could complete the thought, his wife appeared. Quick on his feet, he changed course: '*Asuo, mese, Techiman paa mmaa... yere!*' (In Techiman, yams are in abundance!). It was not a lie. Only a redirection. He seized the yam to avoid the fire. Thus, even in conversation, a little *bayerɛ* can save a man from ruin.

56. Antifragile: thriving amidst harm (Nyame nwu)

In Greek myth, there is a creature that has haunted the imagination for centuries: the Hydra of Lerna. A monstrous serpent with many heads, and, as the story goes, when one head was lopped off, two would grow in its place. A strange arithmetic: subtraction yielding multiplication. This is not resilience. It is a kind of perverse flourishing under assault.

Nassim Taleb, a modern essayist, has coined a word for such phenomena: *antifragile*. Unlike something that just survives a blow, the antifragile thing *grows* stronger because of it. Yet Taleb's notion, however recent the vocabulary, wouldn't have surprised our ancestors.

In the Akan world, there is a creeping herb known in Twi as *Nyame bewu ansa na m'awu* (God will die before I do). Like the Hydra, it thrives on injury. Its Ewe name is no less suggestive: *agbɔmaku maku* (the grass that does not die). Botanically, it is *Commelina nudiflora*, a modest plant in appearance, but stubborn beyond reason. It grows on roads. It survives on the tops of fridges. Put it in your pocket and it might just take root there too (forgive the exaggeration, but barely). The more you try to rid yourself of it, the more it multiplies.

This, surely, is antifragility with roots in clay. It spreads where the soil is harsh. It flourishes where it should perish. And perhaps it is no accident that our elders named it with a sentence affirming the immortality of God, for in so doing, they declared a spiritual analogy: some things cannot be unmade, precisely because they belong to the divine order. Interestingly, the plant is both healer and

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hazard. It cures stomach aches and boils, yet to sheep it is poison. The Gas call it *to lilei* (Sheep's Tongue). Even in the hard pavements of Accra, it endures.

Now, a bit of digression. Some Akan plant-names are sentences, not labels. These are sayings with roots, leaves and stories. Let us look briefly at six others.

First is *aberewa kata wo twe* (Old lady, cover your nudity). This is the shy but widespread *Mimosa pudica*, known in English as the sensitive plant. Its leaves fold inward when touched, as if aware of shame. Children love it; it is nature's curtain.

Then comes *bedi-wo-nua* (Will sleep with a sibling). This is *Canarium schweinfurthii*, whose sweet-smelling gum was once stirred into palm oil or shea butter. The scent is so enchanting, folklore suggests even a brother might be drawn to sin. A joke, perhaps.

Third is *nnye (me na) nnyene me* (Do not take me and bind me). This is the milk bush (*Thevetia nerifolia*), often planted as hedges in schools. Its sap is poisonous; its shade, unfriendly to neighbours. Yet the trumpet-like flowers offer nectar, sweet and sincere.

Fourth, we find *owuo amma manka m'asem* (Death makes me mute). This is *Coix lachryma-jobi*, or Job's Tears, worn by mourners in times past, especially for children. The name carries a hush; the grain looks like a frozen tear.

Fifth is *tutu mmirka ko hwe epo* (Run quickly and look at the sea). It is an energetic herb: *Synedrella nodiflora*. Cut it, and the blade dulls. It is also called *kwadupɔ* and *mamponfo apɔ* (Mampong people are civilised). Perhaps this is a nod to their mannered speech, even when they hurl insults: "Please," they say, "you're an idiot."

Lastly, *toa-ntini* (join veins), known scientifically as *Paullinia pinnata*. It is used as a chewstick, and its Twi name is a nod to its healing properties. Mix its roots with oil and *Piper guineense*, and it is said to stop bleeding. Medicine in vine form.

And so we return to *Nyame nnwu na mawu* (God does not die, so I shall not die). It is more than a proverb. It is a cosmology. The soul, like the indomitable herb, doesn't end with its pruning. It returns, again and again, not despite the wound, but because of it. In this, the Akans and the ancient Greeks agree that life is mysterious, and sometimes best revealed when it refuses to die.

57. No one attacks me with impunity (framo)

The people of Asante Mampong call themselves *Kontonkyi Framo* and like to sing the following lines:

*Asuo atware Okwan.
Okwan atware asuo.
Opanyin ne hwan?
Yebɔɔ kwan no kɔtoɔ asuo no,
Asuo no firi tete
Asuo no firi Odomankoma
Mampong Kontonkyi;
Obɔɔ a ehi Akoma nana ne yen
Amaniampon Nana, ɔde akobɔɔ gye yen tataa
Mampong Kontonkyi Framo;
Abobɔnnua ne ti ahi
Kotoko yenwie ko*

*The river crosses the road.
The road crosses the river.
Which is the elder?
We cleared a road to the river,
The river sprang forth long ago.
The river sprang forth from creation.
Mampong Kontonkyi,
The rock that wears down the axe.
Heirs of Amaniampong, who bullets taught how to walk
Mampong Kontonkyi, the framo tree
The woodpecker's head (beak) wears off
Kotoko, we are not done*

In doing so, they proclaim something botanical, historical and philosophical. Like much of Akan thought, the phrase is a living metaphor, rooted in forest and stone, flowering in proverb and song.

Let us begin with *framo* (*Terminalia superba*), a mighty forest tree with a broad crown and generous seed. On abandoned land, it is often the first to spring up. But more than this, the *framo* is also a kind of Hydra. Cut it down, and new shoots rise uninvited from the stump. Destruction leads to its multiplication.

Now, this sturdiness is observed in the natural world. Tiny pinhole borers burrow into its bark, drawing the attention of the *abobɔnnua* (the woodpecker). These birds perch on the *framo*, hammering away in search of larvae. They also

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make their nests in dead *framo* trees. Yet the *framo* is so tough that in attacking it, the woodpecker may crack its beak. He who seeks to wound Mampong, like the bird pecking at *framo*, will wound himself.

As for *kontonkyi*, the image is more geographical. The road to Mampong is winding. In Twi, *kontonkyi* means crooked or curving, as the following (unrelated) proverb affirms: *Yegyina dua kontonkyi so na yetwa dua pa* (We stand on a crooked tree to cut a good one). The wisdom is that you must endure difficulty to gain success.

The origin of the name *kontonkyi*, however, may be younger than the people's roots. Oral traditions diverge. In *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, Rattray writes that the Mampong people first lived in Adanse under Kwakye Panyin. He was succeeded by Amaniampong, who, following disputes with Akrokerri, led the people to Behinase.

Hardly had they settled when Kumasi's chief, Osei Tutu, called for aid in battles against Amakom, Dormaa and Tafo. Amaniampong answered. He had barely unpacked, yet chose the battlefield over the fireside. In gratitude, Osei Tutu gave him the title *Yede akoboɔ gyegyɛ no taataa* (He whom bullets taught to walk).

Later, they moved to Akrofonso, where Amaniampong died. His successor, Boahen Anantuo, led the Asante army in the decisive war against Denkyira at Feyiase. Okomfo Anokye foretold that the leader of that battle would not return. Boahen Anantuo, fully aware, chose to lead anyway. He died not far from a granite rock marked with mysterious grooves. Rattray speculates these were from the rubbing of stone celts, or *Onyame Akuma* (God's axes). Perhaps the grooves inspired the phrase *ɔboɔ a ehi akuma* (the rock that wears down the axe).

It is an apt image either way. Granite, like Mampong, does not yield to the ordinary blade. And so it became one of the people's proudest sayings. No one attacks them with impunity. The Latin world would have said *Nemo me impune lacessit*. The Asante Mampong put it more simply: you hurt yourself when you strike at us.

For their sacrifice, Mampong was granted the Silver Stool. Akuamoa Panyin, successor to Boahen Anantuo, was its first occupant. His role didn't end there. During the Asante-Akyem war, he marched alongside Osei Tutu. When the Asantehene was killed, it was Akuamoa Panyin who led the army home. For this, he was named *Odi Nwisia Hene* (King of Orphans). He built a settlement where present-day Mampong now stands, but it was Atakora Panyin who led the people from Akrofonso to Mampong itself.

So when the Mampong people call themselves *kontonkyi framo*, or *ɔboɔ a ehi*

akuma, they speak of a history of endurance and self-giving. Like the porcupine (emblem of Asante), they bristle with defence. The porcupine's quills lodge in the flesh of the predator and don't easily come out. The attacker is left in pain, and the porcupine walks away untroubled. Mampong, likewise, does not invite conflict. But should you press in with force, it is you who will bleed.

And what of the *framo*, finally? A practical wood. It glues well, takes polish handsomely, and is easy to carve. Yet it has its limits: it tends to split under nails. It is used for canoes, coffins, boxes, shingles, and fences. Useful. Cooperative. But never weak.

The lesson is clear. Mampong is strong because it knows when to yield and when to stand. It is generous, yes, but not to those who come with axes. For even the hardest iron grows blunt against certain stones. And some trees, once cut, rise again.

58. A blessing in disguise (nsusuaa)

There are moments in life when what seems a setback is, in fact, an advancement. The English idiom calls it “a blessing in disguise.” It’s the sort of truth only visible in hindsight and never flashy when it arrives. A Twi proverb offers something similar, and, like many Akan sayings, puts it in the mouth of a plant: *Nsusuaa se: m’ani mmere ntwuropo* (The small garden egg says, I don’t envy the big garden egg).

To understand this declaration, we must first turn to plants, and, if you will allow, begin with a detour through one of Ghana’s most familiar guests: the tomato. The tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*) is a straggling herb with strongly scented leaves and cheerful yellow flowers. Its fruits, of course, need no introduction. Our markets, tables and kitchens would be poorer without them. And yet, this most beloved of vegetables, introduced to Ghana perhaps five centuries ago, seems to have not found a true Twi name. The name *ntoose* is a mere echo of its English origin.

The tomato, for all its colour and charm, is a fussy companion. It demands constant watering, especially during the harmattan (called *petraa*), when the sun is a stern overseer. Grown in ridged rows and carefully nursed, the plant is as needy as it is generous.

When tomatoes thrive, they do so too well. In Techiman, during a glut, you may find desperate farmers begging passers-by to take their harvest – for free. Transport to market is costly; buyers are scarce. With no funds to take the

produce back and nowhere to store it, they must give it away or watch it rot in the open air.

Disheartened, the farmers don't plant the next season. Prices rise. Tempted, they grow again. Another glut follows. The cycle spins on like a cart with a broken axle. Were I to take up tomato farming (though heaven knows I would do no such thing), I should plant only when no one else does. The logic is cruel, but sound.

Market women from Accra, seasoned in trade, often dictate the prices. If the farmer agrees, they come with their boxes, harvest the fruit, and take it to town. Some try to renegotiate after harvest. What, after all, can the farmer do with tomatoes already picked? A minor consolation: these women would often bathe openly (in their birthday clothes) at the village stream. In such moments, the local boys (I wasn't part of it, of course) would become sudden devotees of water-fetching. But that, perhaps, is a separate tale.

The seeds are usually dried before planting, and curious rumours circulate among farmers. It is said that often, "the government seizes the gun" (euphemism for impotence) of many male tomato farmers because they taste dissolved fertiliser to judge its strength. A small thing, repeated often, may have strange effects. Whether true or not, the rumour lingers like a half-forgotten proverb.

Now, back to our proverb, and *nsusuaa* and *ntwuropo*. Before tomatoes held sway, soups and stews were made with humbler things:

Nnuadewa (garden eggs), oval and pale when young, orange and sweet when ripe. A hardy variety bears the name *ansurowia* (unafraid of the sun).

Ntwuropo (eggplant), longer and violet, shiny to the eye, slightly bitter on the tongue. In some areas, they are called *bofoowaa*.

Kwahu nsusuaa (Turkey berry), bitter and bumpy, and, despite the name, not exclusive to the Kwahu. The real name may be *kwan-bo nsusuaa* (roadside berries).

And finally, *nsusuaa* proper (black nightshade). Small, prickly, and medicinal, its berries turn yellow, purple or red when ripe. Bitter in taste, but useful: its leaves and fruit treat sores and stimulate appetite. The bitterness, as it turns out, has a purpose.

In daily cooking, *nnuadewa* and *ntwuropo* were preferred. They were larger, sweeter, and more appealing to the pot. *Nsusuaa*, by contrast, was the overlooked cousin. Only occasionally did it make its way into the soup.

But therein lies the parable.

Because *ntwuropo* is large and sweet, it is quickly picked and consumed. It

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vanishes early, perhaps too early. The small, bitter *nsusuaa*, overlooked and untouched, outlives its rival. Its bitterness protects it. Its modesty preserves it. The very thing that made it seem undesirable becomes the reason it endures.

So, the *nsusuaa* does not need to envy the *ntwuropo*. Its disadvantage turns out to be its blessing. It thrives, not because of what it lacks, but because of what it escapes.

And here we return to the English phrase, “a blessing in disguise.” The world is filled with such things. The lost job that led to a deeper purpose. The failed exam that reawakened diligence. The friend who left, and by leaving, revealed others more faithful.

Sometimes, it is the bitter fruit that feeds us best.

59. From frying pan to fire (egya)

There was a time, so the story goes, when men did not know fire. Zeus asked the titan Prometheus to mould humanity from clay, after the likeness of the gods. But Prometheus grew too fond of his creations. He began to instruct them, to elevate them. This, Zeus forbade. Most of all, he commanded that man be kept ignorant of fire. For fire meant power. And power, once grasped, is seldom returned. Yet Prometheus, in defiance of the king of the gods, stole the flame from Olympus and gifted it to man. So began our great ascent, and our deep peril.

Today, we get fire mainly through gas and electric stoves. But in the past, Ghana's primary domestic fuel source was firewood, chiefly from a particular tree known as *esia* (*Petersia africana* – see page 119). This wood burned evenly, steadily. Not too fast, not too slow. It became the faithful companion of our mothers and sisters who, upon hearing that an *esia* had fallen, would go and harvest its bounty for the kitchen.

They didn't fell living trees for fuel. No. That would have violated an ancient sense of propriety. Only dead wood was taken, and the process of collection was itself a kind of rite. With axe (*akuma*), cudgel (*absobaa*), and wedge, they split the trunk and trimmed the limbs, leaving behind the tiniest twigs – those known as *mmabaa*.

These *mmabaa* served the daily cookfire, a three-stone hearth called *mukyea*. Matches were a luxury. You fetched fire from your neighbour; a glowing coal balanced on a metal plate. But there was a catch. Some people used this errand as

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an excuse to peer into someone's pot. Hence the saying: *Wobesɔ gya anaa wobehwɛ nkwan mu* (Did you come for fire, or to inspect the soup?) A gentle warning to in-laws and others who meddle in matters not their own.

Larger logs, too unwieldy for cooking, served another purpose. They were arranged into what was called *nkukuagya*, a slow-burning communal fire, often lit by the menfolk who bore the weight of the wood. It was the television of the rural homestead. Children and elders gathered round it, roasted plantains in the dusk, and told *Ananse* stories beneath the stars.

Of course, every fire brings smoke. When it grew too thick, the family would call upon the one seated closest to remove the offending log. But if every smoky piece is cast out, soon the fire dies, and with it, the warmth. Thus, *Wontu entwene! Wontu entwene! – na yereda awo* (Throw it away! Throw it away! – and soon we shall sleep in the cold). It is a warning, no less wise for its simplicity. In seeking to eliminate minor discomforts, we may usher in ruin. As the English say, out of the frying pan, into the fire.

Within these logs often lived the *anyinaboa*, the firewood grub. It would creep away from the heat, deeper into the wood. Yet fire, relentless and patient, would find it all the same. Thus, the Akans say: *Edane se boɔ a, egya behi ato ayinaboa* (Even if it turns to stone, the fire will reach the firewood grub). So it is with death, duty, and truth. We may delay, but we cannot escape.

In time, Prometheus got his punishment. Zeus had Hephaestus fashion a woman of surpassing beauty, Pandora. She was sent to Prometheus' brother, Epimetheus, bearing a sealed box with an instruction: *Do not open this*. As it happens in such tales, she opened it. Out flew all manner of affliction: disease, deceit, hunger, war, death. Fire had been the seed of progress. But it came wrapped in calamity.

So it is still. Fire cooks our food, warms our bones, and lights our cities. But it can just as easily consume the world. A single warhead in the wrong hands could reduce everything to ash. And yet, even then, we must meet our fate with clarity. For our elders teach: *Ogya nye de nso ebye wo nsa a, gye se wotafere* (Fire is not sweet, but if it burns your hand, you still must lick it). We have taken fire. Now we must bear it.

60. Unity is strength (prayε)

My friend Yaw Tuah once told me, in the tone of a man half amused and half ashamed, that he used to cherish T-Blaze's *Wo Sisi* in his twenties. Back then, the song struck him as bold, clever, even righteous in its scolding of the so-called "Sugar Daddies." Now in his forties, with the creeping self-awareness that age brings, he finds the track distasteful and says he wishes he could apologise to the very men he once mocked by proxy.

This curious shift is no hypocrisy. It is what time does to us: the young hero becomes the old villain in someone else's anthem. Today's jest becomes tomorrow's discomfort. It is not unlike the old broom.

In Twi, we call this the *prayε-tia*; the shortened, tired broomstick. Once new, it was long, straight and soft, fit for the cleanest of duties: sweeping smooth bedroom floors, kept close at hand. But as time wore it down, it became stubby and stiff. Unfit for bedrooms now, it was relegated to the *mantwea* (the obscure corners of the house). There, it did the dirty jobs: scrubbing spirogyra from bathroom floors, sweeping chicken droppings and tackling the stubborn grime of the yard.

And so the proverb: *Mayε prayε-tia, mete anyanyadee nso mennya aye* (I have become like the old broom; I clear filth, but no one praises me). We are grateful for the broom when it is new, and when it is not, we are only thankful that we no longer have to use it.

Still, there is poetic justice in the fate of the *prayε-tia*. For before it was old, it had itself replaced another weary broom. It had its season of honour, its own

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moment of glory. The cycle continues: the fresh broom becomes the old, the privileged becomes the cast-off. This, I think, is what Yaw Tuah was driving at. We are all *praye-tia* in waiting.

Those who declare that one should not spend money on lovers when one's mother is still alive miss something important. Our fathers, too, had mothers; yet they bought gifts for our mothers. Tomorrow, our children will do the same. It is one thing to advocate for parental care. Quite another to weaponise it as moral leverage.

The broom itself, though humble, is a marvel of design. Fashioned from palm fronds, it undergoes a long, patient ritual. First, one cuts the branches and strips off the leaflets with a machete. Then, each leaflet must be delicately split along the midrib with a knife, the green pulp carefully shaved away. At last, the bare spines are gathered and bound at the base. A slow labour for a tool whose life will end in silence.

The broom, in Akan thought, is not just a cleaner of dust. It is a teacher. While a single stick can be snapped with little effort, a bundle tied together cannot be broken. Hence the proverb: *Praye wɔ hɔ hi, woyi baako a, ebu; woka bɔ mu a, emmu* (A broomstick alone breaks easily, but together they cannot be broken). Unity is strength.

There is a certain sanctity attached to the broom as well. In many homes, it was taboo for a sweeping woman to let the broom touch a man. Should this accidental contact occur, the broom was placed on the ground, and the man was required to step on it, lest he become impotent. One might chuckle, but the women seemed quite diligent in enforcing the rule. The risk of losing their dawn delight was a powerful motivator!

Brooms even played a role in measuring feet. When a mother needed to buy new footwear for her child at the market, she would snap a stick from the broom, match it to the child's foot, and break it to size. That stick, carried in her wrapper, became her ruler, her promise to bring back something that fit.

But the broom had darker uses, too. In certain cases of suspected theft, diviners would employ two broom bundles in a grim form of trial. The suspects sat on stools while the diviner murmured incantations behind them, crossing the brooms near their necks. Should the brooms tighten, the thief was supposedly found. Woe to any man who had also dared pursue a woman the diviner fancied; the ritual might prove more personal than prophetic.

The broom could be used symbolically. If a troublesome or unlucky person departed from the house, some would sweep the floor behind them to clear the misfortune, to cleanse the air of their presence.

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And yet, in the end, the broom becomes *praye-tia*; discarded, forgotten, and replaced. There is no need to lament this. It is simply the truth of life. We are each the darling of the day and the leftover of tomorrow. As in Ecclesiastes, there is a time for everything: a time to sweep the bedroom, and a time to scrape the chicken yard.

Let us, then, not cling to the illusion of permanence. Let us work while we are fresh and long, and not begrudge the younger brooms when our season passes. And let us remember, always, that what one stick cannot achieve, many may accomplish together.

Section G: Success and Ambition

This part talks about the problems that come with success and how social rankings are delicate. It shows that just because you start well doesn't mean you'll end well. It also encourages people to accept that they don't know what will happen in the future and to stay humble when they succeed.

61. Do everything for power (*aberewa kata*)

Much has been lost from the treasure trove of Akan myths, especially those that once sought to explain how the world began. Yet among the fragments that remain, one story still lingers. It is the tale of why *Nyame*, the Sky God, now dwells far from the earth.

In some ways, it resembles the myths of ancient Greece, where Gaia, the primordial mother, plotted against Uranus, the Sky Father. But in the Akan imagination, the story unfolds differently. Here, it is Aberewa – the old woman, the Earth Mother, or perhaps *Asaase Yaa* (earth goddess) herself – who unintentionally sends Nyame away.

Aberewa was pounding palm nuts in a mortar, her pestle rising repeatedly toward the sky. Whether from distraction or disregard, her pestle kept striking Nyame. Irritated by the disturbance, he rose and withdrew, putting distance between himself and the affairs of earth.

Realising what she had lost, Aberewa sought to repair the breach. She began to stack mortars one upon another, trying to build a tower that would reach Nyame. At last, she needed only one more mortar. She sent a child to fetch it, but none could be found. Desperate, she told him to take one from the bottom. He obeyed, and the whole pile collapsed.

There is something here like the Tower of Babel, that Biblical story of human ambition that reached too far and ended in confusion. In both tales, the desire to reach the divine ends in a tragedy.

Yet Aberewa is more than a figure of myth. In our everyday speech, she is the

wise woman, the elder to whom we turn when we must weigh a difficult choice. She may be a mother, a grandmother, or simply one who has seen the world and can see into its heart. When faced with a dilemma, we say we will ask the Aberewa.

Despite the reverence for Aberewa, a proverb says, *Se woretɔn tumi a, tɔn w'aberewa kɔtɔ, na wo nsa ka wie a wode akɔgye no* (If power is for sale, sell even your mother to obtain it, and once you have secured it, you may go and buy her back). A shocking thought, no doubt. But one intended to underscore a truth: power, once gained, can redress what was lost in its pursuit. Better to act decisively than be left forever powerless.

Aberewa has also lent its name to a curious little plant: *Mimosa pudica*, known in Akan as *Aberewa kata wo twe* (Old Lady, cover your nakedness). When touched, the plant closes its leaves, folding them inward like a shy child hiding from strangers. The Twi name arises from this behaviour of the herb. Children delight in calling its name and then brushing its leaves to see the plant respond, as though it understood. Yet the mimosa is not just reactive. It seems to learn. If disturbed too often without consequence, it ceases to respond. One is reminded of people who, after long suffering, become resigned. They fold no more, not because they do not feel, but because they know it changes nothing.

The mimosa creeps along the ground with thorny stems and delicate pink flowers. Its leaves droop at dusk and rise again at dawn, a rhythm called *nyctinasty*. Though it is used in treating the Guinea-worm, I know of no wider medicinal use. Perhaps that is because it is relatively new to our land. The Global Biodiversity Information Facility suggests that the plant only reached Ghana in the 1930s.

If so, then stories claiming that it aided enslaved Africans during the transatlantic trade must belong to another soil. Some say mimosa leaves, folding when stepped upon, warned the hunted of passing slave raiders. Others claim it was slave merchants who used the plant to track those who had fled. Such accounts may well have roots in the Americas, where *Mimosa pudica* is native. There, on a foreign land, many Africans fought to escape bondage, much as Aberewa tried to reach back toward Nyame. Her failed attempt echoes their story – of families torn apart, of towers never finished.

If Aberewa teaches us anything, it is that we must never stop reaching. Even when the tower crumbles, we must begin again. Just as she sought to reconnect with the divine, so must we seek to reconnect with the descendants of those lost across the sea.

62. Easy come, easy go (anyankoma)

I must confess a fondness for walking through rainforests. There is something there that reminds me of the simplicity of Eden, before the fruit that should not have been touched. I've enjoyed the forest since my childhood. I would roam the forest and, now and then, I came across some fruit I didn't recognise. I followed my father's rule: never eat what I haven't seen others eat. Better to miss a feast than to fall prey to poison.

But the day I found the fruit of the giant yellow mulberry (*Myrianthus arboreus*), I bent my father's rule by carrying one home to consult my father. To my relief and delight, the old boy smiled and named it *anyankoma*. Among the Kwahu people, it is known as *kwesi popuro*. The fruit's flesh, or perianth, is sweet and tangy like pineapple, which is why some call it *kwakuo-abrobe* (the monkey's pineapple). In form, though, it more closely resembles the sweetsop (*Anona squamosa*), known in Twi as *apre*. Curiously, the soursop (*Anona muricata*) is also called *apre* in Twi, and *aluguntugui* in Ga.

Even the tender young leaves of *anyankoma* have value. They can be boiled and eaten, much like okra, and once fallen, they rot into a dark and fertile humus that enriches the soil with nitrogen. The tree thus feeds both stomach and earth.

In traditional medicine, *anyankoma* has many uses. Its pulp treats anaemia and diarrhoea, eases dysentery and eye pain, soothes malaria, stomach troubles, and aching teeth. It is believed to purify poison and improve the quality of breast milk. The seeds are used for boils; infusions from the bark are taken for diabetes. Even the ashes are gathered to make soap. To treat headaches, one boils the root

with *wisa* (Guinea grains), sits above the steaming pot, cloaked in cloth, and inhales the rising vapours, a kind of healing sacrament that uses breath and heat to drive away pain.

Yet not all the tree gives is equally valued. Its wood, for instance, is soft and burns far too quickly. One could scarcely finish cooking a pot of stew before the fire is gone. So it is that the Akans say, *Akɔdaa sika te se anyankoma-gya, wotwa so a, edum* (A child's money is like the firewood of the giant yellow mulberry; strike it once, and it burns to ash). Here, the child is no literal youth but the one newly rich, whose fortune came suddenly and, like dry kindling, may vanish just as fast. Unlike old money, which spreads its risks and holds its wealth with slow, cold fingers, this is the fire that dances bright for a moment, then dies.

That proverb has lingered with me. I think of it often, especially when I remember how I first encountered *anyankoma*. I had the luxury of bringing it home, of asking those who knew. But what of those who were torn from home? What of the Africans taken across the Atlantic, cast into unknown forests and unfamiliar fruits? In Suriname, where the cruelty meted out to enslaved people was perhaps among the worst in human history, some fled the plantations and took refuge in the wilderness. These Maroons, as they came to be called, faced the vastness of the Amazon, a place more perilous than anything they had known.

How did they survive, not knowing which fruits were safe, which leaves could cure, which roots might kill? Did they learn by trial and error, risking life with each taste? It is a question that haunts me.

And now, here in Ghana, we have allowed so many of our native fruits to fall into forgetfulness. There may come a day when a child stumbles upon *anyankoma* and wonders, as I once did, whether it is safe. If this book endures, may it answer them. Let them know that this fruit, at least, will not harm them.

And may they remember the lesson that comes with it: what is gained quickly may be lost just as fast. But what is known, what is shared, what is passed down – that endures.

63. Youth question the world (besimankuma)

Those who would change the world would do well to begin when they are young. For real change, especially the sort that overturns what is long established, demands a certain energy of spirit, a confidence that often belongs only to the young. There is also, quite usefully, a touch of naivety in youth. The world appears clear-cut. Good and evil stand on opposite sides, and you feel you must simply choose the right and cast out the wrong. Tradition seems stale, and wisdom sounds like cowardice.

Yet time does something rather subtle. As the years pass and you're drawn into the entanglement of life, the clear lines begin to blur. What once looked black or white now reveals its greys. Experience, that uncompromising tutor, teaches us that most of what survives has done so for a reason. The ancient customs, the awkward silences, the slow gestures of respect; these are often marks of long understanding. You begin to see Grandma's wisdom, once dismissed as quaint, as something solid and true. And so, in place of youthful outrage comes a deeper reflection. We become gentler in our judgements because we begin to understand the weight of living.

Our ancestors used the *besimankuma* tree (*Cussonia arborea*) to tell this story well. It grows in the grasslands, low and rounded, bearing a crown that seems unassuming. Its leaves are used in traditional medicine to wash epileptic children. The roots and stems, boiled into decoctions, ease the pain of menstruation. Yet it is the tree's life in fire-prone grasslands that gives it its real lesson.

Besimankuma often suffers. Bushfires sweep through, scorching its bark,

consuming its leaves. But the tree endures. It has learned how to survive in a land where destruction is seasonal. When the rains come, the tree sends out fresh green shoots. These young branches, full of life and innocence, look upon the older trunk and ask, “Why are you so black and rough while we are so smooth and bright?”

The main stem does not argue. It just says, “Wait for the harmattan.” And then it comes. The fires rage once more, and the green shoots learn for themselves what the older stem already knew. When the smoke clears, their bark is blackened, their smoothness lost. They never ask again. They now understand.

So it is with us. As children, we believe we would never make the mistakes of our parents. We question their decisions, we criticise their silences, we scoff at their caution. But life, like the bushfire, comes upon us. It sings, tests, and sometimes wounds. We learn that our parents’ roughness was earned in the same way. Even where we think they erred, we begin to see what shaped their choices.

This is not to say that youth should imitate blindly. Far from it. There is a fire in the young that can bring renewal. Naivety, though dangerous, can also be a virtue. It allows some to attempt what older, wiser folk would never try. Many fail. But now and then, one succeeds and changes everything. That is the wonder of youthful hope.

Still, we must temper our triumphs with humility. Even the most brilliant success today may have withered in a different time. We do well to remember the proverb: *Okɔmfɔ-bɔnɛ a watena nyarefo ho ama ɔkɔmfɔ-pa abɛto no, aye bi* (The bad priest who stayed with the sick until the good priest came has also done well). There is grace in effort, even when imperfect. The one who tried and failed did not fail in vain.

It is often only when we become parents ourselves that we truly begin to honour our own. Their bark, dark and scarred, now looks like strength. We survived through their care, even when it was clumsy or incomplete. If you are lucky and your parents are still around, call them today and apologise for the many storms you brought to their door.

64. Saving for a rainy day (ɔkoro)

We walk daily under a sky we cannot command. The sun rises, the wind stirs the leaves, and we assume, often quite casually, that the world tomorrow will be much the same as it is today. But experience whispers otherwise. Life is a tentative arrangement. We may close our eyes in sleep and not reopen them. Our hearing may falter, our health collapse, or our very livelihood may vanish with a single knock on the door or a message in the inbox.

And so, the wise don't live only for today. They store something aside for the storm that may brew over the hills. The English have a tidy phrase for it: *saving for a rainy day*. Insurance, though clothed in modern attire, is an organised form of this ancient prudence.

Now, to some Ghanaian ears, insurance sounds like a foreign thing, an import stamped with the seal of impersonal maths. Yet, at its heart, it is neither cold nor foreign. It is about the many bearing the burden of the few. In this, it bears resemblance to our own *nsowa*, the contributions gathered at funerals. When one loses a close relative, friends and kin rally to provide financial aid. Here, there is an unspoken covenant: you, too, must have stood by them in their time of grief. As they say, *Ayie ye nkɔgya-nkɔgya* (Funerals are a matter of give and take).

The difference is mainly one of timing and formality. Funeral donations are made after the sorrow has struck. Insurance is the gathering of resources before sorrow comes, with the understanding that it may strike any of us. Both stem from compassion organised into action.

Insurance refines this impulse into a system. By observing patterns in life (birth, death, accident, illness), companies can predict how many may suffer loss each year, though not who exactly. And so, they collect from all, and when calamity visits one household, the pool is opened to provide relief. The grief remains, but the blow is softened. It is not perfect, but it allows the fortunate to assist the afflicted.

And don't assume this foresight is uniquely human. Even the beasts of the field put us to shame. The Bible, in one of its sharpest proverbs, commands the lazy man to consider the ways of the ant. This tiny creature toils today for tomorrow's meal (Proverbs 6:6). The Akans make the same point. However, through a different emissary: *Esiane se ekom beba da bi nti na nkurukutie kutiri koro ho sie* (Because hunger will surely come one day, the grasshopper stores morsels from the *skoro* tree.

This *skoro* tree (*Albizia zygia*) grows fast, spreads wide, and serves many purposes. Its young leaves feed the hungry, its bark offers medicine to the sick, and its shade blesses the weary. Even its powdered wood irritates the noses of sawmill workers, a sign that this tree does not go unnoticed.

From bark to leaf, from gum to root, *skoro* sustains both body and livelihood. Its gum thickens our stews and stabilises our ice cream. Its bark treats wounds and weary eyes. It is even said to awaken love and soothe fever. A tree of utility, of foresight.

The grasshopper, not careless, gathers from this tree because it knows what we too must know: fair weather is no guarantee of fair times. To prepare is to be wise. And to insure, when rightly understood, is not to fear tomorrow, but to face it with calm.

65. Your background shapes you (εferε)

One Sunday after church in Dresden, I was invited to lunch by a well-meaning family. I accepted with enthusiasm, stomach rumbling with anticipation. What met me at the table, however, was not quite what I expected: pumpkin soup with bread. Now, hunger makes many things tolerable, but not always delightful. I managed a few sips, smiled politely, and began to plot my escape for a proper meal elsewhere.

Until that day, I had never eaten pumpkin soup. I had eaten boiled pumpkin in Ghana, and if I am honest, I didn't enjoy that either. So my reaction wasn't wholly new. And I am clearly not alone. The elders long ago put it into words: *Εferε, yedi no butaa-butaa* (We eat pumpkin without enjoying it). And yet we do eat it, don't we? Why persist in eating what doesn't excite the palate? Pumpkin is rich in vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

The Akans call it *εferε*. Botanists call it *Cucurbita pepo*. It is a sprawling, creeping plant whose elliptical fruits wear coats of green streaked with white, hiding within golden yellow flesh. The seeds, flat and oval and brown, are edible, too. Even the leaves are boiled and served like spinach. But perhaps the most fascinating thing about this plant is not its taste, but what it teaches us about who we are.

Our ancestors observed: *Εferε firi n'ase na ebum* (The pumpkin ripens from its base). In other words, its roots shape its fruit. The message is simple yet deep. One's background, one's upbringing, one's roots will always manifest in time. You can cross borders, don new clothes, learn new tongues, and even eat

pumpkin soup with a fork and napkin, but your origins will whisper their presence all the same.

We live in an age that often encourages reinvention, sometimes at the expense of honesty. But the proverb reminds us that there is no shame in where one comes from. Roots don't bind the soul; they anchor it. A tree with no roots is not free; it is dead.

Another Akan proverb takes the thought further: *Eferɛ da faako a, eberɛ* (If the pumpkin lies undisturbed, it ripens). If a person's life is not continually unsettled or disrupted, their potential can mature fully. Of course, not every still moment is fruitful, just as not every stirring leads to harm. But there is wisdom in the notion that growth often requires room and peace.

Pumpkins are not confined to Ghanaian proverbs. They enjoy international celebrity. In the United States, they feature on Thanksgiving tables and shine (sometimes ominously) at Halloween. In Germany, as October approaches, house fronts light up with jack-o'-lanterns: pumpkins hollowed out, faces carved into their sides, lit from within like lanterns glowing in the twilight.

And yet, before it becomes the familiar pumpkin of harvest rituals, the fruit begins life in a different form: as the white-seed melon, *Cucumeropsis mannii*, or *akatoa* in Twi. The fruit, egg-shaped and creamy with green streaks, is edible, but its seeds are the true prize. These are used to prepare soup or stew, their flavour cherished. Then there is *wɛwɛ*, whose smaller seeds are ground whole (husk and all), then sieved to create the rich, aromatic base for soup. Even as I type, I find my mouth watering. *Wɛwɛ nkwan*, that delicious soup, as we say in Ghana, "resembles your eyes."

There is a gentle irony here. The same fruit that once repelled me, in another form and in another context, now stirs my appetite. We often judge too quickly, forgetting that the same root can produce things both bitter and sweet. Life, like *ɛferɛ*, contains many layers; some to endure, some to enjoy.

66. Don't bite the hand that feeds you (nkranpan)

During the First World War, some soldiers, gripped by fear, decided to shoot themselves in the foot. The idea was simple. A wound, if not fatal, might save you from the trenches. Off to the field hospital instead of the front lines. Of course, no one admitted it. These were “accidents,” or so they claimed.

Years later, this grim practice gave birth to an idiom: *shooting oneself in the foot* – doing something that works against one's own best interest. And though few of us carry rifles these days, the practice persists. We sabotage ourselves often. We make decisions that harm our wellbeing, undermine our relationships, or jeopardise our livelihoods, often without fully grasping the cost until the damage is done.

This curious phenomenon is not unique to humans. Nature, too, has its saboteurs. Take, for instance, the African mistletoe *Loranthus spp.*, known in Twi as *nkranpan*. It is a semi-parasitic plant; not quite independent, yet not entirely helpless. It grows on the branches of other plants, stealing nutrients and thriving at the expense of its host. What's most unfortunate is that it tends to favour the most valuable trees: cocoa, kola, sweet orange. One rarely notices *nkranpan* on lesser plants. When a parasite troubles a weed, few take note.

Farmers loathe it, and rightly so. If left unchecked, mistletoe reduces yields, weakens the tree, and in time may kill it. And yet, in doing so, it destroys its own future. *Nkranpan* cannot live without the tree it harms. It flourishes only while the host flourishes. The Akans saw the irony and captured it in this proverb: *Nkranpan se ɔreyɛ bese ama bese anim agu ase, sɛɛ nnim sɛ ne daakye aduane na*

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ɔresɛ no (The mistletoe thinks that by troubling the kola tree it is disgracing it, not knowing that it is destroying its own future food source.)

This is the logic of betrayal, ingratitude, and self-centred ambition. When you harm the hand that feeds you, you harm yourself more than you know. The proverb warns against biting into the very root of your sustenance. If someone has been kind, don't be tempted to repay that kindness with mischief or disdain. To do so is short-sighted. You may well be cutting off your own supply of help.

Still, it must be said that not all relationships with *nkranpan* are hostile. For some of us, its presence on cocoa or orange trees offered the perfect setting to ambush birds. The mistletoe's bright red flowers and juicy spherical fruits proved irresistible to birds, and so where there was *nkranpan*, there was also the promise of birds. It gave a small boy's hunting hobby both cover and opportunity.



We played with the flowers too. Their tip, shaped like a matchstick head, would burst with a soft pop if stroked gently in repetition, a trick accompanied by a playground song:

Abena Yeboah (Abena Yeboah)

Wo maame bo wo a na wosu (You cry when your mother hits you)

Wo papa bo wo a na wosu (You cry when your father hits you)

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Wo mpena bo wo a na wosere (But you giggle when your fiancé hits you)

It often burst at the fourth stroke. My elder sister, as it happened, bore the name Abena Yeboah. The song annoyed her immensely, which, of course, made it all the more delightful to sing.

Though a menace to farmers, *nkranpan* has its redeeming uses. Its slightly fleshy green leaves are boiled for medicinal drink, especially by pregnant women. The dried leaves and stems are roasted or boiled for herbal steam baths, thought to relieve various ailments. Even this parasite, troublesome though it is, has something to offer.

The world is full of things like this: beautiful and burdensome, dangerous and yet useful, depending on how one interacts with them. But the central lesson is that never destroy what sustains you. Wisdom doesn't lie in ungrateful ambition or cunning sabotage. It lies in remembering that your flourishing is often tied to the well-being of others, be they people, trees, or truths you would rather not acknowledge.

67. Poverty imbitters every enjoyment (ɛfan)

It has been said that the Twi word *oyiwa* is a corruption of the English phrase *here you are*. I have searched through the old texts and cannot find the word in the usual sources, which may lend some credence to the claim that *oyiwa* is of recent vintage.

As for the chant *osee-ye*, it too is sometimes traced to a supposed origin in the English *all say yeah*. I remain doubtful. Rattray, writing as early as 1916, recorded *osee-ye* as an Akan shout of victory or affirmation. So the matter, like many others in Ghana, is far from settled.

Indeed, we often hold different views even on the most basic things. Take our tribal names, for instance. There are various accounts of how the names of the Akan sub-groups came into being. One tradition holds that *Bono* means “the first created,” or “firstborn,” and that other Akan groups migrated from Bono lands. Yet the Adanse people lay claim to primacy in creation.

The names *Asante* and *Fante* are equally contested. The most popular version for *Asante* ties it to unity forged in war – *asa nti*, meaning “because of war.” Another account tells of a division among the Akans: when their ruler failed to reconcile the quarrelling factions, one group departed for the coast and came to be known as *Fa-tsi-fo* (those who left), and those who remained were called *Asua-tsi-fo*, for refusing to heed the king’s call. A third explanation, more botanical than political, claims the Akans survived on wild plants during a time when northern raiders made farming perilous. One group depended on a plant

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called *san* and became the *Asan-te*, while another turned to a plant called *ɛfan*, thus becoming the *Fan-te*.

I don't pretend to know which tale is true. There may be more still. Those interested in learning more may consult Claridge's *History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti* for further details. My concern here is with *ɛfan*, the plant the Fantis are said to have eaten.

Most Ghanaians would recognise *ɛfan* if shown it. In English, it goes by the curious names *love-lies-bleeding* or *tassel flower*. Botanically, it is *Amaranthus caudatus*. A shrub with marked veins under its leaves, it produces dense panicles of violet flowers and often shows a reddish-pink hue near its taproot. Its leaves are edible, used like spinach or cooked into soups.

Yet despite its nutrition and beauty, *ɛfan* suffers a poor reputation. A proverb gives us the clearest insight: *Ohia hia wo na wote abetee a, edane ɛfan* (If you are in want and receive *abetee*, it turns into *ɛfan*). The implication is sharp. If even *abetee*, a food I don't rate, is preferable to *ɛfan*, then the latter must be truly grim.

What the proverb truly means, of course, is that poverty sours all things. A dish you might otherwise tolerate or even enjoy becomes detestable when it is all you can afford. It is not the *ɛfan* that is bitter in itself, but our condition that renders it so. When Pat Thomas sings that *Sika ye mogya* ("Money is blood"), and Daddy Lumba insists that there is no such thing as tainted wealth, they may be pointing at a hard truth: poverty is a kind of affliction. It drains the colour from the world. What might have been a blessing in another season of life is now an irritation.

In this, the Akan proverb stands shoulder to shoulder with the Roman saying, *paupertas omnia mala est* (poverty is the root of all evil). Or with the Russian lament, "When money speaks, the truth keeps silent." All cultures, it seems, agree on this much: poverty warps the senses, poisons the palate, and dims the light in all our pleasures.

68. Enjoy the fruits of your labour (afetewa)

As social creatures, we harbour a deep desire to be accepted. We adopt manners, language, and dress out of a longing to belong. And yet, no matter how sincerely we act, someone will always murmur a criticism. Dress modestly, and you are accused of lacking flair. Dress elegantly, and you are said to be showing off. No choice escapes judgement, and the noise is endless.

We must, then, cultivate the art of blessed indifference. Not the indifference that despises others, but that healthier kind which refuses to live enslaved to their opinion. It is a skill we all need in our age.

If you labour, you are right to enjoy the fruit of that toil. It's not vanity. It's fairness. The Ghanaian musician Amakye Dede put it plainly: *Nea ɔbre na odie* (it is the one who has toiled that enjoys). What is the use of labour if it brings no joy? Even the Bible affirms the same truth:

"It is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labour under the sun... this is a gift of God." – (Ecclesiastes 5:18–19)

An Akan proverb echoes this wisdom: *Dee ɔtase afetewa no, di n'adee* (Whoever gathers the fruits of the *afetewa* tree should eat them). There is no shame in harvesting after an honest effort.

The *afetewa* (known in English as black plum and in science as *Vitex doniana*) is a tree of wide renown in Ghana. Its many names across local languages bear witness to its presence from the forest edge to the savannah. The Ewe call it *fɔyiti*, the Ga *shɔ*, and the Dagomba *ngmariba*. It grows in the roughest soils, thriving in sun-baked fields where other plants falter.

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Its fruit is a soft pulp wrapped around a sturdy seed. It is sweet, and sweeter still to elephants, bees and children alike. Beehives are often found tucked among its branches. The tree seems almost to invite life.

There is more to it than fruit. The young leaves and pulp yield a serviceable ink. The bark, easily peeled, is boiled with leaves to make a remedy for mouth sores and a dye for clothing. The wood is remarkably useful: furniture, stools, crates, musical instruments and firewood all spring from its generous frame. Even its offcuts burn well. It is a tree that gives and gives again.

In folk medicine, no part is wasted. The roots and bark are brewed to treat stomach complaints and infertility. The leaves are applied to reduce fevers or ward off crocodiles at watering holes. Children were once bathed in water infused with the bark to treat rickets. In short, it is a tree for life, and the wise have known how to use it.

I find the smell of *abisaa* (as *afetewa* is sometimes called) disagreeable.* My own tastes lean toward the *atoa*, the hog plum (*Spondias mombin*), which fruits in the same season. *Atoa* trees often line our fences, and their leaves serve to treat coughs and, in times past, gonorrhoea. The fruit, though pleasantly tart, punishes greed. Eat too many and you will suffer for it.

There may be a lesson in that: enjoy the fruit of your labour, yes, but do so with discernment. Moderation guards the blessing. Even a good thing, if taken to excess, can turn upon you.

So let us give thanks when our efforts bear fruit, whether sweet as *atoa* or we find its smell disagreeable as *afetewa*. And let us eat it, without apology, and without asking permission from the ever-present chorus of critics. After all, the labour was ours.

* Some readers might think I am picky since this is about the fourth item for which I have indicated I don't like. Well, I like almost everything else, so I am clear in my mind about the things I don't like: *dawadawa*, *nkanfo*, *abetee* and *abisaa*.

69. Shoot for the moon (ananse adodowa)

A life without a vision is like a journey without a map; you may enjoy the scenery for a while, but the road soon begins to twist aimlessly. We are creatures designed for purpose. A clear goal, one that binds our smaller efforts into a coherent whole, brings direction and peace of mind.

Without it, we chase the glint of every passing bauble. We spend years gathering degrees and collecting experiences like so many shells along the shore, only to discover they don't amount to anything solid. If you aim to be a commercial farmer, then why spend your best energies acquiring a doctorate in insurance? Not all knowledge is necessary, and not every opportunity must be seized.

Still, even the best plans are only intentions. Life has a way of redirecting us. We aim for a target, and sometimes we miss. But effort is not wasted simply because the outcome differs from our original design.

The American speaker Les Brown put it this way: "Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars." It is a lovely metaphor, if slightly confused in terms of astronomy. But the sentiment is sound: set your aim high, and though you may fall short, you may yet end up somewhere remarkable.

This same idea is beautifully echoed in an Akan proverb: *Ɔsonkurobia/Ananse adodowa se ɔrekɔso bese, wannya anso, aswo abemmen* (The fig-leaved cola says it will produce cola, and though it fails, it bears a fruit of its own).

Ananse adodowa (*Cola caricifolia*) is a small, sturdy tree with its young leaves covered in fine brown hairs. Its fruits resemble those of the better-known cola tree; produced in fingers, green at first, ripening into a bright golden yellow. Both

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the soft pulp and the seed kernel are edible. Though its fruit is considered inferior to the commercial cola, it is still nourishing.

The tree is not only a source of food. Its white wood is prized for making bows. Its bark, boiled alone or with red pepper, is used to treat piles. A decoction becomes a sitz-bath. The leaf juice soothes inflamed eyes and serves as a purgative. It is applied in the treatment of sleeping sickness, chickenpox, measles and small-pox. Some communities even mix the powdered leaves with tobacco for snuff. This tree, overlooked by those chasing its shinier cousin, has quietly served both home and healer.

The proverb reminds us that we are not failures simply because we do not become what we first intended. The fig-leaved cola did not become cola, but it became something else, something still worth having.

We are likely to miss many of our goals. And perhaps that is no tragedy. What matters most is not that we hit the mark exactly, but that we become fruitful in the attempt. Often, the person who tried to write symphonies ends up building schools. The dream was not wasted. It merely changed shape.

So shoot for the moon, by all means. You may miss. But if your striving bears even a modest fruit (if it shelters someone, or feeds, or heals), then your labour was not in vain.

70. The quiet power of kinship (awapupuo)

When I was young, I learned to carve names and markings into buckets and cooking pots with a screwdriver. I didn't think it remarkable at the time. Like many practical skills, it was born out of necessity.

Years later, I found myself speaking with a German colleague who, to my surprise, revealed he had trained as a carpenter before earning his doctorate. He explained that after completing his pre-tertiary education, he had grown weary of theory and longed to do something with his hands. So he chose carpentry for balance. He also wanted to understand the world through wood and nails.

In Germany, I have since heard of others who take similar detours, learning to repair bicycles or to build furniture before they step into a university. What poverty once forced many of us to learn in Ghana, others now pursue deliberately to reconnect with the physical world.

We who grew up mending our own *chale wote* (flip-flops) with hot knives. We did not know it then, but we were apprentices of ingenuity. The strap of the flip-flop, made from thermoplastic, would often break at its weakest point, the plug. But we didn't throw it away. We heated a knife over fire, melted the torn edges, and joined them. Crude, yes, but effective. We walked again.

Today's children, with their sleek shoes and electronic comforts, might scoff at such measures. The world has changed, and with it, our idea of what is valuable. There is a general disdain for manual trades, for anything that dirties the hands or smells of grease. The old vocations (blacksmithing, sculpture, weaving) have been pushed to the edges.

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But it was not always so. Among the Akan, the blacksmith (*ɔtomfoɔ*) was a person of skill and status. The broader class of artisans (*ɔdwumfoɔ*) included carpenters and joiners too. These were not the desperate but the dependable. The blacksmith, in particular, was a figure of honour, often bound to families and communities by tradition.

Using gold (*sikakɔkɔ*), silver (*dwetɛ*), copper (*kɔɔbre*) and other metals, the blacksmith created intricate works through the ancient lost-wax process. The wax itself was often fashioned from the pulp of the *watapuo* fruit (*Cola cordifolia*), which is soft and easily moulded. Thus the proverb: *Watapuo-aba na ɛkyere ɔtomfoɔ dadeɛ bɔ* (The fruit of the *watapuo* taught the blacksmith to forge).

The *watapuo*, or *wawapupuo*, is no minor tree. Its broad crown gives shade, its seed offers stimulation when chewed, and its pulp teaches form. Such a tree serves as a source of both nourishment and instruction.

Historically, blacksmiths had their own quarters. In Techiman, an area called Tunsuase (named after *tonsuom*, the smith's workshop) bore witness to their skill. In Asante, the town of Fumesua was famed for it.

There is a legend that a youthful Okomfo Anokye, future priest of the Ashanti Empire, once requested a sickle (*adere*) from Fumesua blacksmiths, and they refused. He cursed them. Whether true or not, the story reflects the centrality of the craft. From this tradition comes another proverb, rich with meaning: *Akyenkyena wɔ tonsuom a, asɔkwaa nbwere adere* (If the allied hornbill is in the blacksmith's shop, the white-crested hornbill will not lack a sickle). In other words, if your relative is well placed, you will not go without. It is a lesson in social capital, in the power of kinship and community.

Today, many prefer the swivel chair to the workbench. The office has become the modern emblem of success, and we have too quickly forgotten that the tradesman often earns more than the clerk – and with more freedom.

In Germany, artisans are in short supply. One wonders whether Ghana, in addressing youth unemployment, might look to workshops. To export artisans as skilled ambassadors of the hand and the hammer. We may find, in doing so, that the proverb still holds. If one of us is at the forge, many may yet eat from the fire.

Section H: Personal Values and Virtues

This part helps you think about what's important to you and how you behave. It encourages you to think about being humble, not always being overly nice, and avoiding being too proud. It talks about how society expects certain things from us and how it's good to help each other. Overall, it reminds us to stick to our values.

71. Is it the end that counts (εtene)?

In an experiment, psychologists asked volunteers to dip one hand in icy water. The first round lasted sixty seconds at a chilly 14°C. The second round was longer. For ninety seconds, the second hand endured the cold. But in the final thirty seconds, the water warmed ever so slightly, rising from 14°C to 15°C. Afterwards, the participants were asked which experience they would be willing to repeat.

Surprisingly, many chose the second, the longer trial. Despite enduring more discomfort overall, they preferred it because it ended better. The researchers called this the *peak-end rule*: the observation that we don't judge experiences by their total length or average intensity, but by two moments: the worst (or peak) and the end. It is a principle that applies well beyond ice baths. A long holiday soured by a dreadful final day can be remembered with regret. A hard year that ends in reconciliation can be recalled with gratitude.

This, though, is no recent discovery. Shakespeare wrote in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

*"The setting sun, and music at the close,
As the last taste of sweets, is sweetest last,
Writ in remembrance more than things long past."*

The end shapes the memory. It colours the meaning. The Akans knew this, too. Their proverb puts it sharply: *Etene a awuo na n'ano ye nam* (The speargrass is sharpest when dead). That is, it is in death that it does its most cutting work.

Etene, known to botanists as *Heteropogon contortus*, is no ordinary grass. It

grows thick in the savannahs, its slender stems bearing seeds with hooked points and long twisted awns. When alive, it serves the modest needs of roofing and fodder. But in death, its dried blades become like small swords. Its seeds cling to cloth like barbed arrows. The Ga name for it is *ananugai* (spider's arrow). Its edge lies in its ending.

There is a tale told of how *etene* came to be. An old woman once possessed a magical sword, one that fought on command and rested when told the words *adwe betee!* ("Cool down!"). As tales tend to go, Ananse stole the sword, ever hungry for shortcuts to greatness.

When enemies attacked his town, Ananse summoned the sword and cried, "Fight!" It obeyed. It darted and danced across the battlefield, cutting down foes with terrifying grace. Soon, the enemy lay slain. But Ananse had forgotten the second part. He tried "Stop!" He tried "Return!" He tried "Rest!" – but none of them worked. In *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Johann W. von Goethe (1797) tells of an apprentice who, when left alone in a workshop, commanded a broom to fetch water. In the end, the place was flooded because the apprentice didn't know what to say to make the broom stop.

The sword, with no enemies left, turned on Ananse's own people. It slew them one by one. Ananse, desperate, shouted every word he could recall, but not the right one. At last, all were dead, including Ananse himself. Then, with no more blood to draw, the sword thrust itself into the earth and transformed into a plant: *etene*. And to this day, it cuts all who touch it because the word *adwe betee* was forgotten at the moment it mattered most.

It is a tale fit for moral reflection. There is a warning here about hubris and the cost of forgetfulness. But there is also something subtler: a meditation on how endings matter. What began as a glorious victory turned into an unspeakable tragedy, all because the final act was not in harmony with the rest.

So too in life. Many things begin with a promise. Some glow with early success. But if they end poorly, the memory will rot. By contrast, even difficult beginnings can be redeemed by a good ending.

A friendship tested by conflict but sealed by forgiveness. A project delayed by an error but completed with grace. A hard life crowned with peace. In all these, the ending casts its light backwards.

As the old wisdom reminds us, it is not always the start or the strength that matters most, but how it finishes. *The speargrass is sharpest when dead*. Let our endings, then, be thoughtful, deliberate, and worthy, lest we too become cutting where we meant only to shine.

72. Good starts don't guarantee endings (kookoo)

There are those in Ghana who boast that they have never seen a cocoa tree. They think it says something fine about their upbringing, something civilised or sophisticated. But if familiarity with the tree that built our economy is a mark of rural life, then let us hope for more villagers.

Cocoa (*Theobroma cacao*), the “food of the gods,” is a small tree, barely reaching twenty feet. In youth, its leaves dazzle with colour, only to wither as they mature. The Akans have seen this before. They say: *Aware foforo te se kookooahaban, ne foforo mu ye fromfrom, n'awiee ye dwann* (A new marriage is like cocoa leaves; fresh and lovely at the beginning, but it ends in regret). It is a cautionary proverb. A fine beginning guarantees nothing.

The cocoa plant wears its fruit close, sprouting straight from the trunk and thick branches. When ripe, the pods turn brilliant shades of yellow and red, housing rows of reddish seeds nestled in a soft white pulp. Suck that pulp, and you understand why even bees fight for it. But sweetness is no sign of future success.

To plant cocoa, you first wash away the pulp and allow the seeds to dry partially. The planting is called *atɔdwɛ* in Twi. The young seedlings are packed close together, though they are later thinned and pruned. But there are enemies at every stage. Rats dig up the seeds. Diseases swell and blacken the pods. Parasites like mistletoe, pests like squirrels and *akate* (capsid bugs) wage war on the trees. The blackened pods are not discarded, only discounted. They are sold as *abinkyie* – a the rejected that still fetch a price.

Benjamin Addai Antwi-Boasiako

Even the waste has value. Cocoa husks, once dried and burned, yield ash rich in potash, which is useful for making soap. The dried leaves? Excellent for roofing. Even the young pods can replace okra in soup. Yet all of this effort is at the mercy of price and policy.

To harvest cocoa, farmers use a tool called *asɔsoa*. The pods are gathered at central points on the farm and split open, often with the help of neighbours. It is backbreaking work, and we've invested almost nothing in mechanising it. Thirty strong adults might spend a whole day breaking pods, and still not finish.

Fermentation comes next. The beans are heaped, covered with plantain leaves, and left for five to seven days. After that, they are dried on mats (*aserɛnɛ*) spread on a shed (*apa*) because one rainfall can ruin everything.

Eventually, the beans are sacked and sold to licensed cocoa buyers. Here, the cheating begins. Weighing scales are “adjusted” to rob the farmer. A proper cocoa bag should weigh 64kg, but who enforces it? Prices are fixed by government decree, and the beans are carted off on untarred roads to places the farmer will never see – factories where chocolate is made and profits bloom.



Cocoa - Theobroma cacao

Cocoa farmers, like many seasonal workers, live in cycles. During *kookoo bere*

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(the major harvest), they live well. In the lean season, they scrape by. Hence the proverb: *Kookoobene se sene wo a, sene wo wo kookoberɛ, na nsene wo fupeberɛ* (If the cocoa king boasts of greatness, he means during the cocoa season, not the off-season). Even the poor have their hour. But the hour does not last.

Ironically, cocoa is not native to Ghana. When the first cocoa farms appeared in the late 19th century, the colonial government disapproved. It feared that Ghanaian farmers would abandon other crops. And indeed, they did. So, it wasn't government policy that built the industry. It was Ghanaian capital and enterprise. Only when the success became impossible to ignore did the colonial authorities intervene.

During the Second World War, the colonial government forced farmers to sell to a statutory body. The move was meant to stabilise the economy. It became permanent. The Cocoa Marketing Board (CMB) was born, centralising control and, with it, power.

After independence, little changed. Successive governments inherited the same machinery of control. The farmer remained the weakest voice in the room. When Nkrumah unveiled his second five-year development plan in 1959, cocoa farmers were asked to 'voluntarily' forgo any increase in the price of cocoa for five years. The goal? National infrastructure. The outcome? Cities gained roads and towers. The cocoa-growing regions remained in mud.

Today, we show our gratitude by calling cocoa farmers *nkurasefoɔ* (yokels). We forget that the city eats what the village grows.

Once again, we are back where we started. Cocoa began well. It sustained us through wars, paid for schools and roads, and became a global export. But how will it end? Most of our trees are old. The youth are not interested. The margins are thin, the labour intense, and the respect absent. Farmers are selling their farmland to illegal miners.

A plant that was once our pride may die in the soil of our neglect. Because a good start does not guarantee a good ending.

73. Resist the devil's provocations (ntɔmmɛ)

I am part of a rather remarkable WhatsApp group, arguably the most spirited online gathering of lovers and guardians of Akan customs and traditions. Its founder, who may well be reading this, laid down a clear set of guiding rules for our conversations. One such rule strictly forbade the posting of unrelated material on the platform.

At the onset of the COVID pandemic, a well-meaning member shared a news update about the virus. The message was swiftly flagged as irrelevant. Many agreed that to allow even this seemingly innocuous post would be to open a door that would not easily be shut. The slope, they argued, was too slippery.

Then, during the debate, someone dropped a proverb into the stream: *Sɛ y'abra adwareɛ dwonsɔ a, enye sɛ woodware* (If urinating in the bathroom is prohibited, it doesn't mean one cannot do so while taking a bath). And with that, the storm settled. Not another objection followed. Had the person written a thesis or a string of reasoned posts, others might have taken up arms. But the proverb ended the matter.

To appreciate the full force of that wisdom, one must understand something of the older Akan bathroom: a structure quite unlike the modern, tiled conveniences we now take for granted. In rural areas, especially, the bathroom was typically an open-air cubicle built outside the main house. The four corners of this humble construction were often formed from the living stems of *ntɔmmɛ* (*Dracaena arborea*), a plant which also marked the borders of farms. It was commonly planted at the corners of rural bathrooms, at the borders of farms, or

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even as symbolic markers between family lands. The plant's vertical growth and durable wood made it ideal for this purpose. You didn't walk past a line of *ntɔmmɛ* stems without knowing that you're crossing into another's space.

These bathrooms rose only to shoulder height, with no roof, so that they might drink the sun and dry quickly. Water for bathing was carried there in a bucket, and a cloth was used as a screen. Singing while bathing was frowned upon, especially for married women. Because there was no running water, the place could easily reek if used as a urinal. So, urinating there was forbidden. Yet, what if, in the middle of bathing, nature called? Was one to step out in dripping discomfort, half-covered, to seek relief elsewhere? Clearly not. The water one used for bathing would also wash away the waste. Here is the heart of the proverb: some rules, like branches in the wind, must bend to human need.

Consider, too, another saying: *Adwareɛ fɔɛ ansa na osuo retɔ* (The bathroom was already wet before the rain fell). It warns against false claims to authorship or change. One must not credit the storm for what was already soaked. The proverb reminds us that not every improvement is the result of the latest effort. As Daddy Lumba sang in *Sesei Wose*, some things were better before the trumpet sounded.

There were other hazards. The wooden fence around the bathroom, often hastily constructed, had tiny gaps. Mischievous boys would peer through, hoping for a scandalous glimpse. And when someone forgot their towel (their *towuro*) and asked you to bring it to them, there was always the chance you would see more than you bargained for. Hence, another proverb: *Worepe obi two ahwe a, na wode n'adwaredeɛ kɔ toa no wɔ adwareɛ* (If you desire to see someone's hydrocele, take their bathing items to them in the bathroom).

Perhaps most striking of all is this lesson: *Sɛ ɔɔdamfɔɔ yi wo ntoma na wopamo no a, nsonsonoyɛ biara nni wo ne no ntam* (If a mad person snatches your cloth while you are bathing and you chase after him, soap running down your limbs, then between you and the madman, no difference can be seen). Not every provocation deserves a reply. The Book of Proverbs says the same: *Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself.*

Thus, with a single proverb, COVID conversations found their rightful place on our platform. One well-placed proverb can do more than hours of discussion. It can, like light in a dark room, reveal the shape of things more clearly than logic ever could.

74. Virtue is its own punishment (afirifiriwa)

To have a good heart, our elders tell us, is to suffer. *Wope no yie a, wobre* (If you mean well, you will grow weary). There is a sadness, even a sort of irony, in this proverb. For what ought to be a crown becomes a cross. Virtue, rather than being praised, often becomes a burden. Or worse, a curse.

The workplace offers a living theatre of this truth. Imagine the conscientious worker: faithful, diligent, upright. He stays behind when others vanish at the stroke of five. The corridors echo with his footsteps alone. This is one kind of loneliness, the physical kind, where virtue isolates by habit. But there is a deeper loneliness still, the emotional sort, when colleagues begin to mutter: “Is this your father’s company?” Loyalty, rather than being admired, is treated as a strange affliction. The one who tries to do what is right is often rewarded with suspicion.

Virtue, it seems, is its own punishment.

The Akan proverb compares this condition to a certain plant – *afirifiriwa*, known in botanical circles as *Cleistopholis patens*. The saying goes: *Afirifiriwa si ho a, epo mpen aduasa* (The *afirifiriwa* tree sheds its leaves thirty times). The figure is not meant to be precise but expressive. Thirty times. Again and again. A perpetual offering of self.

It is no ordinary plant. Known also as *nkyene ne ngo*, it is highly esteemed for its medicinal value. Nearly every part of the tree is used: the leaves, the bark, the trunk. Its very usefulness is the cause of its endless plundering. Leaves are plucked, bark is stripped, wood is taken. Some chew its leaves with kola nut; others seek its healing powers for ailments ranging from fevers and colic to rickets

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and tuberculosis. It even treats the melancholy condition once called sleeping sickness, and perhaps in this, metaphorically at least, it heals those numbed by too much care.

And because of all its gifts, *afirifiriwa* is never left alone. Its very goodness draws hands to it, again and again. In this, it mirrors the fate of the virtuous person: constantly harvested, constantly leaned upon, and often, regrettably, taken for granted.

There is a curious cruelty in human nature. Those who repeatedly benefit from the good-hearted are often the first to question their sincerity once the giving ceases. "He's never really kind," they say. "He only did it for praise." Never mind the thirty times the leaves were freely given.

There is a Greek proverb that speaks in the same key: *No good deed goes unpunished*. It is a bitter cousin to our Akan wisdom. But the Akan version is more subtle, more tragic. It is not just that one is punished for doing good. It is that goodness, by its very nature, can become the occasion of suffering.

Yet perhaps there is something noble in this, too. *Afirifiriwa* grows on abandoned lands, returning green to emptiness. It is a pioneer plant, uninvited yet necessary. Its goodness is in its willing exhaustion for others. Perhaps that is what our elders meant all along. That true virtue is doing good even when it costs, even when it is misunderstood.

Still, the proverb doesn't suggest we must be fools. A plant cannot walk away, but people can. Even the generous must learn to guard their giving, lest they become bitter from over-harvest. Let us not be too quick to condemn those who change after being taken for granted. After all, even *afirifiriwa*, once stripped too many times, cannot leaf again.

75. The multitude detests the dissent (apakyie)

Pan, the wild god of shepherds and untamed places, once dared to challenge Apollo, the divine Master of Music, to a contest of song. Pan played with the charm of woods and wind, his music stirring birds from their branches and squirrels from their burrows. Even the trees swayed as though nature itself leaned in to listen.

But when Apollo took up the lyre, all movement ceased. The air itself held its breath. His song was too perfect for noise. The audience, awed, declared Apollo the winner; all except one. King Midas, preferring the rustic melodies of Pan, voiced his dissent. For his stubborn honesty, Apollo gave him the ears of an ass, a mark of folly for daring to go against the crowd.

This, in essence, is the lesson behind the Akan proverb *Apakyie akyiri nkuronwi kwa; dodo kyiri abaako asem* (The multitude detests the lonely voice). Even Pan, that wild rebel, was shocked that anyone would stand alone against divine consensus.

Let us dwell a little on the imagery. *Apakyie*, the extra-large gourd, was once covered with tiny, downy hairs (*nkuronwi*). These soft hairs once protected the young fruit from pests and disease. But as the fruit matured, the hairs withered and dropped away. *Kurohinko*, a contracted form of *akyiri nkuronwi kwa*, captures this idea: the shedding of what once covered, the parting of what once belonged. When the *apakyie* matures, the hairs desert it. So too does the crowd abandon the dissenter.

It is a subtle but searing metaphor. The hairs, once loyal, now declare by their

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absence that the gourd stands alone. And so it is in society. The one who breaks ranks, who sees differently, finds that the very people who once supported them now step aside. Loneliness is not always the mark of error. It is sometimes the cost of vision.

In his song *Yenfa Nto Wo So*, Amakye Dede uses the proverb to powerful effect. He sings of injustice, of false accusations, of being forsaken by the world, yet insists that God sees the heart. Popular opinion may shout the loudest, but it doesn't always speak the truth. That is the deepest courage. Stand for what is right, not what is applauded.

The gourd, in Akan society, is more than a vessel. It is a world of meanings, nested like Russian dolls. The *apakyie* is the great bowl; wide, flattened, strong. Cut and hollowed, it becomes a container for palm oil or smoked meat. The white pulp is scraped out, and the shell, hardened by boiling, becomes something enduring.

Below it in size is *kontoa*, the bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*); narrower in the neck, broader at the base. It can stand on its own, used to fetch water, carry oil, or, in older times, store gunpowder for hunters. A proverb linked to it says *Kontoa na ɔpe na hama sɔ ne kɔn* (The gourd invites the rope to its neck). It speaks of people who, in full knowledge of the consequences, march straight into their troubles.

Smaller still is *toa*, derived from the calabash tree (*Crescentia cujete*), a different plant altogether; not a creeping vine but a tree with round fruits. Then comes *koraa*, the smallest vessel, perfect and round. It holds palm wine with a particular sweetness that seems enhanced by the gourd's earthy charm. And at the very bottom is *bentoo*, the enema bulb; once made not from plastic, but from calabash, used for its practical, if undignified, function.

The full roll call is instructive: *apakyie* (extra-large), *kontoa* (large), *toa* (medium), *koraa* (small), and *bentoo* (extra-small). A family of vessels, each serving a different purpose, yet all born of the same natural gift: the gourd. Even in politics, these names have been summoned. In 2000, Nana Akufo-Addo once claimed the ruling party was distributing *bentoo* to influence votes, a moment that sent political supporters into laughter and symbolism.

But beneath the humour and horticulture lies the truth: when you dissent, you risk isolation. The *Abilene Paradox*, as Jerry Harvey called it, describes a strange social phenomenon: a group may collectively choose something that none of them individually desires, simply because no one is willing to voice disagreement. In such moments, the *apakyie* proverb becomes a mirror.

We are tempted to go along, to avoid conflict, to stay with the hairs. But

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sometimes, the right thing is to be the gourd that loses its covering – to stand apart, to be stripped of popular protection because silence can be worse.

King Midas was wrong about the music, perhaps. Or perhaps he was right. But he was punished not for being mistaken; he was punished for speaking out. And so, like Amakye Dede sings, let the world say what it will. God sees the heart.

76. The biggest praise is no praise (asratoa)

Time is an odd sort of physician. It comes uninvited, gives no diagnosis, offers no explanation and yet still, it often heals. A great calamity befalls us, and for a while, it seems as if the very sky has collapsed upon our heads. Life loses its colour. We believe, earnestly, that joy has departed for good. But wait. Give it a little time, and something surprising happens. The sun peeks out, our laughter returns, and we find ourselves, quite without meaning to, smiling again.

Why? Because joy, like a spring under tension, has a resting place. We don't dwell endlessly in either rapture or despair. After sorrow has done its worst, our hearts somehow rise again to their natural level. This, psychologists now call the *hedonic treadmill*, but it is no new idea. The soul knows what the scholars have only recently measured. We grow used to both our trials and our triumphs.

Yet here lies the catch. If we adapt to tragedy, and that is a comfort, we also adapt to blessings, and that is a danger. For just as pain becomes bearable with time, goodness too becomes invisible. The things we once marvelled at become mundane. The people who serve us faithfully slip beneath our notice.

This is why the truest praise may be silence. When your helpfulness has become so habitual, so expected, that no one remarks upon it, that, oddly enough, is the highest compliment. You have become like the air: unnoticed, but essential.

Consider the task of cleaning a toilet. Do it once, and your partner may sing your praises. Do it faithfully every week, and you will hear nothing – until the

day you forget. Then, suddenly, your lapse is noticed. The good becomes background noise; only the deviation draws attention.

The Akan, with their usual earthy wisdom, put it this way: *Asratoa Kofi di ašempa nso yede ne tiri bɔ duam* (The snuffbox serves us well, yet we still knock its head against a tree). This plant, the *asratoa* (*Oncoba spinosa*), offers us much. Its roots treat dysentery and bladder trouble; its decoction helps with urethral discharges. Its polished fruit becomes a snuffbox; its shells, musical rattles. Put it in the fire, and it bubbles and bursts with a splendid sound. And yet, for all its gifts, it is knocked about without gratitude. Such is the fate of the truly useful.

In truth, we often undervalue what serves us best. Even the proverb admits this; the snuffbox, with all its merits, receives more bruises than blessings. We might say, in kind, that the most reliable among us are also the most overlooked. A Scottish parallel comes to mind: *Aye the back o' the door gets the muckle clout* (The door most used is the door most struck). Familiarity breeds blindness.

The *asratoa* is also a case study in how we shape our habits by what we prize. Snuff, once regarded as medicinal, had its place. A proverb says: *Wode nkwan pa pia hwennorɔ a, wonna nhua asra* (If you use good soup to clear your nose, you don't need snuff). In other words, the better remedy should make the lesser obsolete. But human beings are not always rational. If your companions insist that snuff is the superior choice, you may find yourself reaching for the snuffbox because you do not wish to be the odd one out.

Thus, another proverb warns: *Wo mfefo regye asra na woannye bi a, yese wo mmwere awu* (If your friends take snuff and you don't, it seems your nails are spoiled). The implication is painfully clear: we imitate those around us out of fear of standing alone. Hans Christian Andersen saw this clearly in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. There, an entire kingdom pretends to see what doesn't exist, simply because others pretend first. Only a child, not burdened by fear of looking foolish, dares to speak the truth. That child's clarity should be our own.

Let us not take the precious for granted. The ones who labour quietly, who serve without fanfare, who endure being knocked about like the *asratoa*; these deserve our thanks, even if they never ask for it. And if we must mimic anything, let it be gratitude. For in a world ruled by adaptation, thankfulness must be a chosen discipline.

77. The Dunner-Kruger Effect (ɔdwen)

The ancient Greeks believed in a spring at Pieria, whose waters granted inspiration and learning. To drink deeply was to be filled with wisdom; to sip lightly, however, was to become insufferable. Alexander Pope captured this paradox memorably: *A little learning is a dangerous thing; Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring.*

It is an idea with repeats far beyond Greece. In Ghana, the town of Asueyi (near Techiman) has long been famed for its remarkable sons and daughters. Local lore attributes their brilliance to a stream after which the town is named. The stream is cold as if drawn from some hidden glacier, shaded by generous trees, and said to flow from the very rocks. In times past, new parents would journey there to fetch water for their children, believing that one sip might awaken intellect. Though modern pipes have now replaced the sacred stream, the memory lingers.

Can water make one wise? Is genius drawn from a wellspring, or shaped by the hands that raise us? The modern debate (nature versus nurture) is perhaps not as modern as we think. The ancients, too, knew that both bloodline and upbringing matter. They would say, *the crab does not give birth to a bird* (nature has its patterns). Yet they also believed in the shaping power of care, ritual, and, quite literally, plants.

Among these was *ɔdwen*, the camwood tree (*Baphia nitida*), whose name means *she thinks*. In some communities, the leaves were set alight and applied to the head of a newborn, in the hope that wisdom would be drawn down through

smoke and warmth. This practice was part of a wider trust in the natural world to aid and nurture the mind.

The *ɔdwen* tree is not only an ornament. Its root, ground and stirred into water, becomes *krɔben*, a red remedy used to heal *mfefena* (a fungal affliction of the toes, common among those who tread barefoot through muddy ground). Its bark and leaves soothe constipation and clean wounds. The heartwood yields a vivid red dye, used in medicine and beauty, while the timber serves in building homes and sheltering kings. Yet for all its many gifts, it is the name – *she thinks* – that draws us in.

Still, *ɔdwen* isn't the only tree with thoughts. As the proverb reminds us: *Ɔdwen redwen na ɔdwendwere redwen* (Camwood thinks, and so does *Lecaniodiscus*). The lesson is that intelligence is not monopolised. The *lecaniodiscus* tree (*Lecaniodiscus cupanioides*), though less flamboyant, is no less useful. Indeed, the name *ɔdwendwene* means *she thinks-she thinks*. It treats infections, eases inflamed livers, and soothes the skin. It doesn't boast. And perhaps in that humility, it teaches us more than camwood ever could.

This brings us to a strange quirk of the human mind, now labelled by psychologists as the *Dunning-Kruger effect*. Those who know little often believe they know much. Their ignorance, oddly enough, gives them confidence. It is the curse of the half-learned: to mistake the first page for the whole book. They haven't drunk deeply and so remain dangerously thirsty. Socrates, by contrast, was wise precisely because he confessed ignorance. He understood that the beginning of knowledge is to know one's limits. When questioned, he often answered with questions of his own, to expose the illusion of certainty.

We are all vulnerable to this effect. A man reads a single article and proclaims himself an expert. A woman hears one lecture and is ready to instruct others. In a world swollen with information yet thin on understanding, knowing too little is dangerous, but not knowing how little you know is even more dangerous.

Wisdom, it turns out, doesn't always shout. Sometimes it sits quietly in the shade, like the abandoned stream of Asueyi or the modest *lecaniodiscus*. Sometimes, it is camouflaged in bark and root, waiting to heal the one who approaches it with care. And sometimes, it speaks through the mouth of an elder, or the line of an old proverb, or the self-awareness to say, "I do not know."

Let's drink deeply, then, of knowledge and humility.

78. The evil that men do (emee)

Before electricity reached Kwaata town, nightfall cloaked the town like a velvet curtain. Only the homes of the wealthy had lights, thanks to their flickering lanterns, *bobo*. The rest of Kwaata remained in darkness. Now, it would seem reasonable that a community so bound by darkness would choose to hold its night market when the moon was full. But Kwaata chose otherwise.

They waited until the moon had waned, until the world was blanketed in almost total dark. Why? Not for convenience. Not for romance. But for deceit. Under the cover of night, they wrapped sand in leaves and sold it to strangers as kenkey. The plan, it seemed, was perfect. The outsiders would be too blind to notice they had been cheated, or so the people of Kwaata thought.

Yet evil has a way of looping back. On that very night, traders from a nearby village arrived with counterfeit currency. In the hush of post-market silence, the townsfolk unwrapped their profits only to discover they had been duped in turn. The market never returned. Thus came the saying: *Kwaata adwasum yedi no da koro* (Kwaata's night market was held only once).

It is an uncomfortable truth, but sometimes we meet mischief with mischief, as though noise could silence noise. Imagine you are bathing late at night, lathered and vulnerable, when your child begins shouting from the next room. You can't rush out, so you shout back louder. You create a fresh uproar to silence an existing one.

This uneasy symmetry is mirrored in the writings of Shakespeare: *The evil that men do lives after them*. And the Akan proverb echoes the same moral grav-

ity: *Bɔne te se emee: wode sie a, eyi wo adi* (Evil is like the *Ocimum canum* plant. You may bury it, but its scent betrays it).

Emee, known also as *defetsui* in Ewe, is no silent shrub. This herb, *Ocimum canum*, grows modestly, bearing pale flowers along upright stems. However, its scent is piercing, unmistakable, and unforgettable. You cannot hide it. It tells its presence long after the roots have been buried. Evil, likewise, outlives the moment and leaks into consequence.

Yet the plant isn't entirely a symbol of wrongdoing. It's also a healer. Its leaves are used in fever remedies, its oils applied to the eyes, its scent burnt in the sickroom to chase away unwelcome spirits. In widowhood rituals, its smoke was believed to banish the ghost of the deceased spouse, the *sasa bɔne* (the malevolent haunting of unfinished business).

And here we must pause. Why should the spirit of a departed spouse haunt their partner? Was there injustice? Betrayal? Some evil that went unspoken while breath still lingered? Perhaps. But even among the living, the shadow of offence can linger. And so, society in its wisdom teaches forgiveness because we all need it. We are imperfect creatures, and so we must learn to forgive, lest resentment become our permanent house guest.

Still, forgiveness is not without limits. To forgive isn't to allow oneself to be endlessly bruised. Bullies thrive where consequences do not. Indeed, there are moments when punishment, not pardon, preserves the moral order.

The *Kwaata* story offers us a kind of parable: that unchecked deceit leads to collapse. It brings to mind Karl Popper's paradox of tolerance: that a society which tolerates the intolerant will, in time, find itself ruled by intolerance. If we give those who would silence others free rein in the name of liberty, they may rise and silence everyone.

True peace, then, is more than the absence of conflict. It is about the presence of justice. One cannot forever burn *emee* to hide the scent of guilt. Evil lingers. It must be addressed, sometimes with mercy, sometimes with firmness – but never ignored.

Kwaata held its night market only once. The darkness they chose became their undoing. Let us choose our light more wisely.

79. Helpful and willing to help (hwenteeaa)

I made a 24-hour odyssey from Accra to Dresden. Germany had drawn my longing for years. So, when the opportunity arose, I set off with a light heart. The journey was no small feat: six hours from Accra to Cairo, then an eight-hour layover, followed by another four-and-a-half hours to Frankfurt, and a final train to Dresden. By the time I arrived, I was exhausted and famished. Shops were closed. My stomach grumbled its complaints.

Enter an Ethiopian guy, also a stranger in a strange land, who, seeing my plight, offered to cook. His kindness was timely. When the meal arrived, I tucked in eagerly. Within seconds, my nose ran, my lips burned, and my eyes watered. I asked what pepper he had used. “Ethiopian pepper,” he replied.

Upon further inquiry, it turned out to be *hwenteeaa*, a familiar herb in Ghana. However, as its botanical name hints, *hwenteeaa* is also found in Ethiopia: *Xylopia aethiopica*. Known in various tongues in Ghana as *so* (Ga), *etso* (Ewe), and *chimba* (Hausa), *hwenteeaa* is common in Ghana.

Hwenteeaa bears slender black pods clustered like tiny tubes. The Twi word *hwenteeaa* (meaning “slender nose”) reflects their shape. The fruit has a taste both spicy and bitter, and if taken in quantity, it clears your sinuses quite thoroughly, as I learned.

It is a plant of many parts and many purposes. In food, in medicine, in timber and fragrance, it wears many hats. Its fruit can stand in for pepper. Its crushed pods serve as perfume. Its wood is pale, resilient and resistant to termites, making it ideal for boats, oars, rafters, and even ceremonial umbrellas. In

construction, it is found in beams and roofs, and its bark becomes doors and partitions.

Yet the true glory of *hwenteeaa* is its healing. I exaggerate only slightly when I say it seems to cure everything. The bark relieves bronchitis and dysentery; soaked in palm wine, it addresses stomach pain, asthma and rheumatism. The roots treat toothache and wounds. Leaves work against fever, while powdered leaves, taken as snuff, relieve headaches. Even epilepsy is met with a mixture of leaf juice and kola nut. It destroys worms, relieves menstrual pain, soothes coughs, and promotes fertility. It is, quite literally, a household remedy, often found in the enema pot and near every rash or boil.

No wonder the proverb says: *Hwenteeaa se, mo deɛ ɔbeyɛɛ fie yie na wammesee fie* (The spice tree says it came to improve the household, not to destroy it). And indeed, it has lived up to its word.

But like all true helpers, *hwenteeaa* doesn't sweeten every mouth it enters. It stings. It burns. It may leave you momentarily gasping for air. Those who come to improve things are not always met with applause. Change is rarely gentle. The one who corrects, reforms or challenges may be accused of pride, of harshness, even of ill will. But there is no growth without discomfort, and no progress without some dislodging of the old.

In this, *hwenteeaa* becomes a symbol of a deeper truth. To help meaningfully is often to disturb. It is easier to flatter than to heal. True kindness may sting before it soothes. As Proverbs reminds us, *faithful are the wounds of a friend*, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.

That dinner in Dresden, served by a stranger, didn't kill me. Instead, it revived something in me. It reminded me that help can come unexpectedly from the hands of someone far from home. Help, like *hwenteeaa*, may burn. But it builds. It heals. It means well, even when it hurts. Thank you, Frew, for the meal. That was thoughtful of you.

80. Those who wish harm upon others... (nyankyerene)

Flight, that old dream of Icarus, didn't truly leave the ground until 1903, when Orville and Wilbur Wright coaxed a motor-powered machine into the air. Centuries earlier, Leonardo da Vinci had sketched his own flying contraptions, his imagination stirred by birds in motion. Nature, it seems, has long been our tutor. We have learned to solve our modern problems by imitating her age-old designs. The science of *biomimetics* makes this explicit: from the dry adhesive tape inspired by the gecko's foot to the bullet train shaped like the beak of a kingfisher.

One might ask: could even something like sandpaper have its origin in the forest? The answer is probably yes, and the answer is *nyankyerene*. *Nyankyerene*, whose leaves are rough to the touch, was nature's sandpaper long before the hardware store arrived. With it, my ancestors polished calabashes and furniture, smoothing the coarse grain of walking sticks, bowls, and chairs. Its utility is so well known that it inspired a proverb of its own. But more than that, its name carries a curious story: *nyankyerene* means "it has not explained yet," drawn from a myth in which it was the last tree in the forest to declare its name.

There are two plants known by this name: *Ficus exasperata*, the larger, and *Ficus asperifolia*, the smaller. The leaves of both are abrasive, their roots large and exposed. The wood of the taller *nyankyerene* is used for drums, canoes, utensils and furniture. Oddly enough, though the leaves are poisonous to goats and sheep, they are still fed to ruminants, suggesting once more that usefulness is often a matter of perspective and preparation.

But it is in the healing arts that *nyankyerene* reveals its astonishing breadth. Its bark, fruit, leaves, roots and sap are all medicinal. It treats ailments ranging from abscesses to asthma, ulcers to urinary tract infections, leprosy to lice, jaundice to joint pain. Its resume includes dysentery, heart disease, fungal infections, bleeding, gum inflammation, ringworm, rheumatism, malaria, fever, oedema and more – far more than any list here can contain.

And yet, for all its virtues, *nyankyerene* is not immune to harm. In the dry season, it sheds its leaves and is exposed to what some call a kind of forest illness. A fellow plant, *skototaka* (*Desmodium lasiocarpum*), is said to possess the power to heal it. But another, the *twitɔn* (*Sansevieria*), urges *skototaka* to withhold its help. The result? The *twitɔn*, once shaded by *nyankyerene*, now finds itself exposed to the blazing harmattan sun.

Here is the moral, as told in the proverb: *Twitɔn kakyere skototaka se mnsa nyankyerene yaree nti na ɔno ara da awia mu* (The bow-string hemp told the desmodium not to heal the sandpaper tree. Now it, too, lies under the scorching sun). The lesson is simple and old as humanity: those who wish harm upon others often suffer the same fate. It echoes the thought voiced by Ampofo Agyei: *If you do good, you do for yourself.*

There is something almost sacred in this logic of consequence. Evil, like a scent, doesn't always stay where it is placed. It drifts. It stains. It spreads to the very hand that flung it. The same root system that sustains the forest also carries infection if one plant falls sick. You cannot injure a fellow creature without, in some measure, wounding yourself.

And so, *nyankyerene* stands as a parable. It reminds us that usefulness may be forgotten, names delayed, help withheld, yet in the end, all actions come home. Whether for good or ill, we live in the harvest of our choices.

If you shade another, you will be shaded. If you expose another, beware the sun.

Section I: Balance and Moderation

In this part, we talk about finding the right balance in life. We discuss what happens when people suddenly become rich, the tricky parts of indirect communication, and why it's important to stay humble. We explore how taking things slowly can lead to success and how being too humble can have its downsides.

81. Value what you have (kɛsrɛkɛsrɛ)

I possess a *Deutschland ticket*, which allows me to journey freely across Germany's breadth and beauty. Yet, a year has passed, and I've scarcely ventured beyond my current city, Munich. I also have visa-free entry to more than 170 countries. And still, my travels remain confined.

This is the same me who once sighed with longing over maps and murmured wistful dreams of distant lands. How strange it is that the very thing I yearned for, access to the world, is now within my grasp, and yet I stay put. The transformation from eagerness to explore to indifference is strange. Why this curious reversal?

Perhaps it is because we humans are often captivated by what we don't possess. We imagine that joy lies just beyond the next hill. Once we grasp the object of our longing, it swiftly fades in lustre, and some new desire steps forward to take its place. In this restless cycle, contentment slips away unnoticed.

The Stoic philosophers offered a method to counter this drift, which they called *negative visualisation*. It is the habit of picturing life without your current blessings. Think of waking one day to find yourself without your job, or without the voice of someone you love. Such thoughts are clarifying. They rouse gratitude from its sleep.

The Akans have long known this truth. One proverb puts it so: *Kɛsrɛkɛsrɛ dɔ krɔben, ɔdwen dɔ ne deɛ* (*Kɛsrɛkɛsrɛ* cherishes his heartwood, and likewise, the *ɔdwen* delights in his own). The wisdom here is universal. Two trees, different

though they are, both value what is theirs. The proverb calls us to do the same. See page 267 for *ɔdwen*.

Kesrekesre, known botanically as *Dracaena mannii*, is a small to medium-sized tree. It bears nearly spherical fruit, within which lies a jelly-like seed, cradled by a yellowish pulp. Its dark green leaves arch gracefully, lance-shaped and often striped with variegation.

Children once played games with its leaves, looping them into duels until one broke. From that game, its Twi name arose. Yet the plant is no mere plaything. It has served as dye, as soap, as a remedy. Its leaves have been used for gout, mouth sores, and lung troubles. Its bark, potent enough to serve as arrow poison, and its roots, steeped for chest pain and stomach afflictions, speak of a plant far richer than one might guess at first glance.

The same could be said of many possessions, or even people. What lies at hand is often more wondrous than it seems, if only we had eyes to see.

In English, we say, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” It is a call to recognise when one already holds something of worth. To take delight in what one has, rather than be consumed by what one lacks, is the beginning of wisdom.

I imagined that possessing a travel pass would make me free. But freedom, like contentment, is not a matter of tools or tickets. It is a disposition of the heart.

To value what one has is to walk forward with gratitude, rather than be driven by the hunger for elsewhere.

82. The downside of being nice always (sahoma)

There is a game, simple in its construction but dangerous in its delight, called *adonko*, the rope swing. You tie one end of a long rope to a high branch and secure a plank to the other. The swinger mounts the plank, grips the rope tightly, and then, with a push, is sent flying through the air with a long, triumphant *faaa*. The motion continues, pendulum-like, until someone intervenes to stop it. One can also jump off, of course, but that, as parents will sternly tell you, is not advised.

As children, we seldom considered the danger. Our eyes saw only the flight, not the fall. Perhaps this innocent disregard for consequences and unclouded joy is one of the enchantments of childhood.

Still, if one insists on playing *adonko*, there are precautions to take. The branch must be strong. The rope must be firm and securely tied. The plank must be sturdy. Of all these, the rope is the most vital. If it fails, the whole project collapses. And for the best rope in the forest, one need look no further than *sahoma*, a climber known to be as strong as it is obliging.

Sahoma (*Millettia zechiana*) is no ordinary plant. Its stem, ridged and tenacious, meanders through the forest with strength. It is so inviting that even grown folk, walking down forest paths, can't resist the lure to swing on it. If it grows by the roadside, it becomes a public amusement.

From this simple truth springs an Akan proverb: *Ɔkwantenpɔn mu sahoma, me na mepe m'adonko na wreto me adonko* (The liana on the main road says, "It is because I permit it that they are swinging on me"). The meaning is clear, and

curiously human. If you make yourself endlessly available, if you never say no, you should not be surprised when others use you. Or overuse you. A comparable English saying is: “Give them an inch and they’ll take a mile.” Neither culture means to condemn kindness. Rather, they warn of its naïve form, the kind that never learns to draw a line.

Saboma’s usefulness stretches far beyond forest frolics. Its tough stems serve as cables to drag timber or secure boats. In housing, it binds. Its fibres become animal traps, sponges, or even drying lines for cocoa farmers. As with many forest plants, its healing gifts are varied. Crushed twigs are taken as a laxative. Powdered bark is inhaled for headaches. The sap of the leaves soothes toothaches and ear trouble, and even the filarial disease of the eyes. Pulped leaves treat abscesses; rubbed on the chest, they ease bronchitis. Root decoctions are drunk for heart ailments. Remarkably, the plant’s parts can also be used as a fish poison.

So *saboma* is generous. But even its generosity has limits.

To be kind is noble. To be generous is good. But if such goodness is never tempered with wisdom, it becomes less a virtue and more a vulnerability. There is nothing saintly in being trampled, and no great honour in being taken for granted.

Saboma teaches us that it is good to offer yourself to others, but not to the point where you are worn thin and frayed. Even the strongest rope will snap if pulled too long in one direction.

The heart must be both open and guarded, like a castle with a drawbridge; ready to welcome, but not to surrender its walls.

83. Sudden wealth is a curse in disguise (apose)

There is an old tale from Phrygia, far from the Akan forest paths, yet startlingly familiar in its warning. King Midas, newly crowned, was wandering through his palace gardens when he came upon an elderly man, drunk and asleep. This man, unknown to Midas, was Silenus, tutor to Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry. Midas, being a courteous host, tended to the old man and returned him to Dionysus.

Pleased by Midas's kindness, Dionysus offered him a wish. Midas did not pause. He asked that all he touched might turn to gold. And so it was. At first, he rejoiced. Trees, bowls, flowers, fruit – everything turned into shimmering treasure. But the delight was short-lived. Food turned to gold before it could reach his mouth. His drink solidified mid-sip. His bed gleamed, but offered no comfort. Even his beloved daughter, running into his arms, became a statue of cold perfection.

Midas, surrounded by wealth, found himself utterly alone. He had gained the world but lost his place in it.

Centuries later, Denis Diderot, the French philosopher, wrote of his own "Midas moment." A new dressing gown, lavish and fine, changed his surroundings. Suddenly, his old furniture looked shabby, his modest belongings unworthy. He began replacing everything, each new object more costly than the last. "Poverty has its freedoms," he wrote. "Opulence has its obstacles."

Both Midas and Diderot learned that what appears to be a blessing may well conceal a curse. When wealth arrives suddenly, it often finds us unprepared,

without the emotional scaffolding to hold it. And the result is usually discomfort. Worse still, one can't always speak of it. Wealth, after all, is supposed to solve everything. If it brings misery, that misery must be borne silently.

The Akans knew this long before Diderot donned his dressing gown. Their warning comes in the form of a proverb: *Wofiti preko pa wo se a, mogya na eba* (If you try to whiten your teeth in a single day, your gums will bleed). The metaphor is rooted in something familiar. People once cleaned their teeth with sponges made from the peduncle of the plantain, mixed with charcoal. Some used the fruits of *apɔse* (*Cnestis ferruginea*), which had a sharp, juicy pulp that whitened teeth and refreshed the mouth.

But whitening teeth too quickly, even with the finest tools, would cause the gums to bleed. The result looked admirable from the outside, but the pain was real and invisible.

Apɔse is a creeping plant with small, bright fruit that appears harmless but holds acidic potency. Like sudden wealth, its virtues must be used with care. It whitens, yes, but it also wounds.

And that brings us back to today. We see it often: someone is lifted from hardship and placed suddenly into the comforts of wealth. Tailored suits replace tattered clothes. The heat and dust of the street give way to air-conditioned offices. From the outside, it appears a triumph. But inside, something aches. They must sit upright and smile. They must act as though this new life fits like a glove, even if it chafes at every edge. Society celebrates their rise, but doesn't prepare them for the loneliness, the pressure, or the self-doubt that often come with it.

True greatness, we might add, doesn't arrive overnight. It is shaped over time, through habit and humility. The world loves the rags-to-riches story, the meteoric rise. But perhaps we ought to ask, as Midas might have asked in the quiet after his golden wish turned cold: *Are they happy?* And if they are not, will they dare to say so? Even if no one sees the bleeding, it does not mean the pain is not there.

84. Never overstay your welcome (nkruma)

When I first moved to Accra, a colleague offered me a piece of advice that, at the time, seemed oddly specific. “Never rent a place with a spare room,” he warned. I asked why. His answer was simple: “If someone from your village finds out, they’ll treat your home like a guest house, and some may never leave.” He spoke from experience, of course.

Ghanaians are renowned for our hospitality. To open your door to another is a gesture of trust, of generosity, and of communal spirit. A guest, for a few days, is a joy. But even joy, when extended beyond its natural term, begins to feel like a burden. The problem is that in a society where community is prized, it is dreadfully awkward, almost unthinkable, to tell someone they have overstayed their welcome. Such honesty could spark offence, even rouse ancestral ghosts back in the village.

So, what is the solution? The answer, it seems, lies in subtlety. A wise host learns the art of signalling: softly, gently, without a single word of dismissal. You can, for instance, begin to ‘accidentally’ forget to prepare their favourite food, or claim the television is broken, or even change the Wi-Fi password.

A friend of mine employed a more inspired method. After her child was born, her mother-in-law came to help. Months passed. Help turned to habitation. No one dared ask, “So, when are you going back?” But one day, my friend went to the market and returned with baskets of fresh tomatoes and cabbage. Smiling sweetly, she said, “I bought these for you, to use when you get home to the village.” The next day, the mother-in-law left with the vegetables.

There is an Akan proverb that summarises all this with charming candour: *Dhɔbɔɔ kyɛrɛ fie a, n'akokɔ nkwan dane nkuruma nkwan* (When a guest stays too long, their chicken soup becomes okra soup). At first, a guest is welcomed with the best the home can offer. A chicken is slaughtered. A feast is made. But no host can keep killing chickens indefinitely. Eventually, the meals become simpler. Okra soup will have to do.

Now, let us be clear: okra soup is no punishment. It is nourishing, rich in vitamins and minerals, and beloved across the country. But within the proverb lies a shift in food and feeling. What was once joyous becomes strained. The host still serves, but no longer with delight.

Okra, or *nkuruma*, is native to our soil. Its pale yellow flowers and long, green pods give little hint of the mucilaginous surprise that awaits in the pot. Cooked properly, okra brings a smoothness that helps the *fufuo* go down. But it also thickens the air with metaphor. In the right hands, okra binds. In the wrong, it sticks.

Some claim the word *okra* comes from *ókúrù* in Igbo, perhaps a clue as to why most Ghanaians call it *okro*. In Twi, it is *nkuruma*, and in Ewe, *fetri*. Its uses are many. The immature pods enrich soups. Dried pods yield *kyinkaase*. Cooked with tomatoes, the soup loses some of its stickiness. Add just the right amount of *kawu* (potash), and it shines. But the proverb reminds us: however good the soup, it can't replace the chicken forever.

Our ancestors, despite their famed hospitality, understood balance. They taught us to receive guests with honour, but they also taught us to withdraw that honour with grace when the time came. And to guests they gave another proverb, equally pointed: *Sɛ wokɔ obi fie na ɔkum akokɔ ma wo di a, kae sɛ enyɛ ne deɛ no na w'adi, na mom w'akokɔ a ɔwɔ fie no na w'adi* (If someone slaughters a chicken to feed you, remember that it is not theirs you have eaten, but your own). Generosity, after all, is a form of investment. And every kindness calls for a reply.

So yes, okra soup is healthy. It saves chickens. But let no one think its arrival at the table means nothing. When your host starts serving it, take the hint. There is no shame in leaving while you are still loved. For grace that is clung to too long becomes an obligation, and even friendship can wither if not gently released.

85. There are two sides to every story (otie)

In July 1909, a man named August Horch found himself at a crossroads. He had left the automobile company he founded following a dispute with his business partners, and now, eager to begin anew, he named his new venture *August Horch Automobilewerke GmbH*. It was a fine name, except that his former colleagues still held the rights to it. They took him to court. The German Supreme Court ruled against him.

Forced to relinquish his own name, Horch turned to friends for counsel. As they brainstormed, the son of one of them, who had been studying Latin nearby, overheard the conversation. The boy came across a phrase in his books: *audi alteram partem* (hear the other side). He suggested *Audi*. The adults paused, then nodded. *Audi* means “to listen,” just as *horch* does in German. The name, a kind of linguistic resurrection, was accepted with delight. Today, it graces one of the world’s most respected car brands.

Yet behind the birth of Audi lies something older and deeper than clever naming. *Audi alteram partem* is a foundational principle of justice: let every man be heard before judgement is passed. This idea isn’t the property of one language, nor one age.

The ancient Greeks knew it. Aeschylus, in *Eumenides*, called for both sides to be heard before a verdict. The Hadith in Islam upholds the same spirit. And in the Book of Proverbs, Solomon writes: “*The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.*”

The Akan people, too, have long understood this principle. One proverb

puts it bluntly: *Wodi kan wo ahemfie a, na wonnii bem* (To be the first to speak in the palace does not make you innocent). But there is another saying, richer in metaphor: *Suhyefa yemmua* (We don't seal the top of a half-roofed building). Here, the wisdom is architectural.

A roof, as we know, must slope on both sides to allow rainwater to run off. Where the two slopes meet at the top is the ridge. In the past, roofs in Ghana were often made with banana leaves, bamboo, bark or shingles cut from the *otie* tree (*Pycnanthus angolensis*). To complete the roof, one must lay a ridge cap over the peak, sealing it against the rain. But this final piece, the cap, must only be placed after both sides of the roof are finished. If you seal the ridge while only one half is complete, you will have to remove it again to finish the job.

So it is with judgement. If you form an opinion after hearing only one side, you may find yourself having to undo your position once the other side is revealed. Why not wait? Let both slopes be in place before you attempt to seal the roof. Otherwise, you risk looking unwise and foolishly hasty. To seal a half-roof is to pretend the work is done when it clearly is not.

A few words on the *otie* tree. A large evergreen tree, it develops a relatively small crown, with branches growing at right angles to the straight, cylindrical bole. The bole can be unbranched for up to 18 metres, sometimes displaying a swollen base or root swellings. It is an important source of medicines and materials. It is frequently harvested for two products: a non-edible oil and a high-quality timber. The oil is mainly traded locally for soapmaking. Beyond its material uses, *otie* is often planted to provide shade in farms.

We live in a world all too eager to form conclusions, especially in the court of public opinion. One voice is heard, and a verdict is declared. But wisdom calls us to be slower, gentler, more deliberate. To listen to both sides is not just a courtesy; it is a duty.

C. S. Lewis once wrote that “what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing.” And often, where you are standing is only one slope of the roof. Wait until you’ve climbed both. Then, and only then, place your ridge cap. For only then is the house fit to withstand the rain.

86. Tea, an excuse for a covert agenda (*damenam*)

I knew nothing of the plant the first time I saw it, yet I admired it instantly. I remember the place quite clearly: the borderlands of a cocoa farm, quiet and gently wild. It stood there with an arresting presence, as if nature had decided to put on its Sunday best. In Twi, the plant is called *damenam* (*Mussaenda erythrophylla* to botanists). It dazzled me like a Bono lady attending her first dance. It had the ostentation of new money and yet something altogether older in its soul.

Sometimes called *Ashanti blood* in English, its roots, when pounded, produce a curious slimy substance. The stem, with its hollow centre, resists the usual methods of propagation. Seeds, with patient care, will take. The root, chewed with *wisa* (Guinea Grains), is reputed to cure cough. Those laid low by illness or injury have turned to it to whet their appetites, and the red calyx (striking as a fresh wound) was once used, dissolved in water, to ease disturbances of the mind.

Now, as with so many things in the Akan world, the plant is woven into ritual and proverb. In older days, a girl's passage into womanhood was marked by *bragoro*, a ceremonial threshold she had to cross before she was fit to procreate. Should she become pregnant beforehand, she was *kyiri-bra* – one who had bypassed the rite, dishonoured herself, her parents, and offended Asaase Yaa, the Earth goddess. The consequence was a disgrace and a spiritual disorder, demanding ritual cleansing.

The *damenam* plant was a part of that sacred rite to cleanse her. Hence the proverb: *Akodaa repe adekoko ahwe a, yete damenam abahan kyere no* (If a girl wishes to see something red, we show her the leaves of the Ashanti blood). It was

a warning. The girl who chases desire without wisdom may find herself caught in that ritual meant to cleanse.

Another saying plays on the redness of its flower: *Damenam te ase deda ese ebere na woate ngo ato so* (The Ashanti blood is already red, and you would pour palm oil upon it)? This is said when someone quarrelsome finds fresh cause to stir trouble. It calls to mind that older wisdom from elsewhere: the mosquito already intended to visit his in-laws' house, and then the wind obligingly carried him there. When a person seeks a quarrel, even the gentlest breeze will seem a summons.

Consider, for example, the American invasion of Iraq. Many believed the Bush administration longed to sink its hands into Iraqi oilfields. Then came the 9/11 attacks, and suddenly a convenient rationale emerged. It was not that the quarrel had begun with the wind; the wind only offered cover. In such moments, we see how quickly principle is drafted to serve appetite.

But let us return to *damenam*. For all its associations with caution and ritual, it remains one of the loveliest plants I know. Its beauty deserves a place in our gardens and along our city streets. We do not need tragedy or taboo to justify its presence. Sometimes, what is good may simply be enjoyed.

87. One thing leads to another (ahoma kyem)

Once upon a time, villages were small clearings situated in forests. These forests were scary places, breathing with the life of things unseen, the domain of spirits both malevolent and mischievous.

Among these spirits was the *sasabonsam*, a creature like man but with a crooked beard, twisted hair and a demeanour most forbidding. He was not alone. There were also the *mmoatia*: diminutive, fairy-like beings who whistled to speak, walked with heels forward and toes turned back, and travelled invisibly on whirlwinds. They were known to snatch away children. If a child refused their enchanted food, the *mmoatia* returned them, often depositing them conspicuously near home. But should the child eat their otherworldly fare, they would linger in that shadowy realm, only to return later bearing charms that could cure many ills.

Our forebears believed that certain plants were themselves spirits in disguise. One such plant was the *ahoma-kyem* (*Spiropetalum heterophyllum*), a climbing shrub that bled red latex when wounded. It was sacred. To cut it, one needed more than a knife: one required fowl or eggs for sacrifice, a naked body to show reverence, and the wisdom to strike only at night, lest one's shadow touch the vine and profane it.

This sense of awe was not just botanical superstition. It stemmed from a worldview in which the forest was a character in the drama, one that could turn hostile. *Kwaeberentuo*, the virgin forest, was feared for its beasts and what it concealed. At the edge of such forests, travellers often encountered *pampim*,

barriers of sticks or stones set across the path. These were no trivial markers. They were checkpoints against the spiritual world, thresholds beyond which only the living might pass.

To stumble upon a *pampim* was to know that one was near a human settlement. Hence the saying, *Woto pampim a, na woato kuro* (*To strike a stile is to strike a town*). One might think of *pampim* as the ancestor of the turnstile, that clever contraption which permits entry in one direction only. Even in old England, countryside stiles served a similar purpose: allowing the shepherd to pass but denying the sheep.

Beyond the *pampim* lay the *kurotia*, the liminal zone at the edge of the village. Here were found the *sumina* (midden), the *yanee* (latrine), and the *amusieye* (graveyard), straddling the line between the mundane and the sacred. This was the land between the living and the dead, the cultivated and the wild.

In the *kurotia*, villagers cultivated the land, which, when left fallow, returned to a kind of secondary wilderness known as *nfofoa*. Within it, elephant grass (*Cenchrus purpureus*) might spread like a green ocean, forming a *nkyekyere*, so thick and wild that one could scarcely walk through. There might also be a *dɔtɔ*, where creepers scaled trees and knit together into a canopy so dense that when a tree fell, its tangle resisted all effort to clear it.

Such places were known as *mmirikisie*: thickets so impenetrable, so tangled, that they were likened to ghost camps. One proverb declares, *Mmirikisie a yantumi anno na yefre no nsamanpo* (*The thicket we cannot clear, we name a ghost camp*). It is a caution about all that lies beyond understanding. When we cannot manage a thing, we often spiritualise it, naming it after what we fear most.

Only the bold (the hunter, the priest, the herbalist with his bundle of charms) dared to venture deep into such forests. For others, the *pampim* was a line not to be crossed. Yet this notion of sacred thresholds is not unique to Akan lore. All across the world, the line between the civilised and the wild is marked. Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, for all its neoclassical columns and imperial stone, is but a *pampim* writ large, a reminder that between one realm and another, one must always pass through something.

So we return to our beginning: *One thing leads to another*. The *pampim* marks a sequence, from forest to field, from field to town, from danger to safety. The proverb reminds us that every threshold crossed brings us closer to some new domain, some next thing. As the English say, *Great oaks from little acorns grow*, and perhaps it is so too with fears, with customs, with stories, and with faith. For in the dense undergrowth of old beliefs, something true still climbs.

88. Being first doesn't make you the best (satadua)

The Portuguese were the first to arrive on the coast of what is now called Ghana, stepping ashore in 1471. They were so taken by the land's mineral wealth that they christened it the *Costa do Ouro*, the Gold Coast. The Portuguese, eager to keep this glittering corner of the earth to themselves, petitioned Pope Sixtus IV for exclusive spiritual backing. The Pope complied, issuing an order that forbade any Christian nation from disturbing Portuguese ventures on the Gold Coast.

Not content with papal authority alone, the Portuguese bolstered their monopoly with gossip and guile. They warned others of the perils of the Gulf of Guinea. They whispered that the inhabitants were cannibals, man-eaters lurking in the tropics. Such were the stories sent northward, to keep rival ships in their home harbours.

But time does not stay put. The Protestant Reformation began to bite at Rome's influence, and the Pope's word no longer carried weight in every quarter. The English, ever curious and characteristically sceptical, asked, "Did Adam bequeath the Gold Coast to the Portuguese?"

In 1553, the English arrived on the Gold Coast, much to Portugal's displeasure. But ironically, it was a Portuguese man who lit the way. Antonio Anes Pinteado, once a royal navigator in Lisbon and later a resident in England, had fallen out of favour with the King of Portugal. In a reversal worthy of Joseph in Egypt, he revealed to the English the secrets of the coast, its riches, its routes, its rhythms.

And so it was that the Portuguese, though the first to come, were not the last

to rule. In due course, the Dutch, Danes, French, Norwegians and even the Prussians planted their flags. After many conflicts and reversals of fortune, the Portuguese departed. England remained, eventually becoming the dominant colonial power in what would later be called Ghana.

The lesson is an old one, but worth repeating: being first does not guarantee greatness. The Akans saw this clearly and framed it in nature. They said: *Nyanyamforowa na ɔsɛi afuo so kan, nso adukuro abɔ no* (The *Nyanyamforowa* was first to spring up on the farm, but it lacks buttress roots). *Nyanyamforowa* (*Mallotus oppositifolius*), also called *satadua*, is among the first plants to reclaim abandoned farmland. Eager, sprouting, industrious, yet it remains a modest shrub, barely four metres high, never aspiring to the lofty heights of the great forest trees. One might almost say it is like the pupil who answers first in class, but not correctly. It is quick to grow but slow to mature.

If there is a Western echo to this proverb, perhaps it is found in the phrase, *The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong*. Indeed, the world often surprises us. The first may be first in time, but not in wisdom. The earliest may make the path, but others reap the fruit.

This is not to say *satadua* is useless. Far from it. Its slender stems are prized as chewsticks. Its leaves and roots are little apothecaries in themselves: curing fatigue, chasing away worms, relieving back pain, sealing wounds, easing headaches and restoring appetite. Its leaves can be turned to drops, poultices, decoctions, powders and infusions. It is also known to make appearances in aphrodisiac mixtures, which shows, if nothing else, that usefulness is not always grand or towering.

Yet, despite these gifts, the plant remains a shrub. It doesn't grow *adukuro*, those mighty buttress roots that support forest giants like the *onyina* tree. These roots, tall as a man and strong as stone, house duikers (the shy, horned creatures of the forest).

So, whether in forests or empires, remember *satadua*. Eager, early, but not exalted. And remember too that usefulness and grandeur do not always grow together. One may be small and yet full of healing. Another may be tall and yet hollow. The test is not how quickly one rises, but what one becomes in the rising.

89. Standing in a river but dying of thirst (tweapea)

The Greeks once told of a king named Tantalus. He was a favourite of the gods until he betrayed them. In a grotesque gesture, he slew his son and cooked him for a divine feast. The gods were not fooled. In righteous fury, they cast Tantalus into a pool of water beneath a tree heavy with fruit. But this, too, was part of the punishment.

Whenever he stooped to drink, the waters receded. Whenever he reached for the fruit, it danced away. He was surrounded by refreshment, but he could not taste it. Hence, the English word *tantalise* – to torment with the nearness of what cannot be enjoyed. And from this same myth comes the phrase *Tantalean punishment*: a fate in which one is surrounded by abundance but barred from its benefits.

What does this have to do with us? Much, I fear. Africa is a land of wealth – gold, diamonds, cocoa, timber, oil – and yet a great many of her people lie hungry and powerless. We bask in sunlight yet live in darkness. The cocoa that sweetens Swiss chocolate is grown on African soil, yet Switzerland, which has never seen a cocoa tree, profits more than we do. One must ask: isn't this Tantalus, reborn in a new form?

Our ancestors knew this pattern well. They said: *Kwakuo nam tweapea so na ɔkɔda, nanso ne se aporɔ* (The mona monkey walks on the Garcinia tree to sleep, yet its teeth are rotten). The irony is palpable. *Tweapea* (*Garcinia kola*), like its relative *nsawkaw-dua* (*Garcinia afzelii*), provides chewing sticks for keeping the

teeth white and strong. And yet the monkey, with unbroken access, suffers tooth decay. To be near a thing, even to dwell upon it, is no guarantee of benefiting from it. Use, not access, is what makes a difference.

Tweapea, despite its bitterness, holds many virtues. Its bark can purge. Its roots, when chewed, awaken the senses. In the right mixture, it serves as a tonic, a balm, a stimulant. It is bitter, yes, but in its bitterness is strength. And yet the monkey that lives in its branches does not benefit from its gifts. Africa is rich in *tweapea*, and rich in gold, oil, sunlight and arable land, and still her children thirst.

Economists call this the *resource curse*. Countries that possess great natural wealth often suffer poverty and misrule. There are reasons, they say: poor governance, fragile institutions, external exploitation. These are true enough, as far as they go. But dare I suggest another possibility? One that makes the learned uncomfortable? Perhaps, just perhaps, we are under judgement. Maybe we, like Tantalus, are being punished. For what crime, you ask? The answer lies in a wound older than any economist's chart.

We sold our brothers and sisters into slavery. We handed over men, women and children, people of our blood, to foreign traders. They were taken from sun to snow, from freedom to chains. Many were forced to flee, to forage in foreign lands, to test fruits with their lives because they did not know which were safe to eat. They suffered indignities too grave for description. And though the buyers were guilty, the betrayal cut deeper when it came from within.

Do not be too quick to say that the gods don't punish such things. Is it so unimaginable that, in their agony, some of the enslaved cried out to the heavens for justice? That they cursed both the ones who whipped them and the ones who sold them? When the wounded cry out, the universe doesn't always ignore them. Perhaps we are still living under the shadow of that ancient cry. Maybe the fruit withers as we reach for it because a reckoning is still unfolding. The punishment of Tantalus was a moral parable. We are not unlike him.

Now, if you don't believe in curses (and many don't), then believe at least in justice. Let us face our past. Let us apologise clearly and honestly to the descendants of those who were betrayed. Let it be said that we confessed, we repented, and we begged forgiveness. Too often, we invite our lost relatives back to Africa for their capital, their skills, their voices. But to welcome a prodigal for profit is no welcome at all. They have every right to find such gestures hollow.

Instead, let us start with humility. If reconciliation comes, so much the better. If forgiveness follows, perhaps they will bring the tools to help us reach

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the fruit and drink the water. Perhaps their healing might lift the punishment we still live under. But until then, let us not deceive ourselves. We are like men standing in a river yet dying of thirst.

90. Wealth draws envy (ahwedeε)

In rural Ghana, we had our unique way of chewing sugarcane (*ahwedeε*). You take the stalk and use your teeth to strip it of its tough outer rind. Aside from strong teeth, you also need a certain knack. You angle the stalk slightly, bite with force at a joint, and twist it with the jaw to split off a piece. No tools. No fuss. My friend, the *ex-musician* Mr Oduro, affirms this practice in his hit song, *Abiba*. I call him an *ex-musician* because Mr Oduro is now Dr Oduro, after earning a doctorate in Pharmacy from D'Youville University in the US. Very good, Abiba!

The sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) is a tall, jointed plant with a fibrous stem that hides its nectar within. Sugarcane has been cultivated for centuries. Portuguese explorers are said to have carried it from its South Asian home to far-flung shores in the late 1400s and 1500s. Today, vast fields sway in tropical breezes from the Caribbean to West Africa, all grown for the same treasure: sweetness.

The lower parts of the cane, having stood longest in the soil, are rich with stored sugar. The upper joints, younger and greener, haven't yet ripened. Thus, an Akan proverb says, *Ahwedeε Abena, ɔde nkɔsi kɔn* (Sugarcane Abena, sweetness doesn't reach the top part). It points up that life is uneven, a mixture of sweet and unsweet. No journey is all delight, no season all sorrow. Just as the sugar is concentrated in one part of the cane, so joy and fulfilment come in certain phases of life, and we must be patient to reach them.

Another saying deepens the lesson: *Ɔbi a ɔde n'ahwedeε na ɔwe n'ase* (The person who has the sugarcane, chews the lower part). The owner enjoys the

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sweetest bite first. It acknowledges the right of the one who laboured to plant, weed, and harvest to take the first taste. Privilege and responsibility are bound together.

The sweetness of the sugarcane often attracts flies to the house. Hence the proverb, *Dee ɔde ahwedee baa fie na ɔde nwansena baa fie* (He who brought sugarcane into the house brought the fly into the house). All that is delightful carries the possibility of trouble. Just as sweetness draws flies, wealth may draw envy. Beauty may invite unwelcome attention. It is not a call to reject good things, but to accept that they come with burdens to be managed wisely.

Beyond metaphor, sugarcane has its uses in Akan folk practice. Its juice, rich in natural sugars, is taken as a quick source of energy for the weary. Pressed and slightly warmed, it soothes sore throats. Chewing the fibrous stalk strengthens the gums, and its ash, after burning, is sometimes mixed with herbs to make remedies for coughs. Farmers know its leaves can mulch other crops, returning organic matter to the soil.

The plant teaches patience, as the sweetest part takes time to form. It teaches discernment, as sweetness must be sought in the right place. And it teaches caution, for every delight carries its shadow. Life, like the sugarcane, is not uniformly sweet. Yet if we learn where to bite, when to wait, and how to guard what is good, we may taste its richest part.

Section J: Ambition and Humility

In this section, we talk about the contrast between being ambitious and staying humble. We discuss the dangers of not being grateful and the problems that come with being too arrogant. We also talk about how important it is to keep growing as a person. The essays remind us that everyone has limits and that it's crucial to be aware of them. We explore how society expects us to behave and the negative effects of being too full of ourselves. Overall, these stories encourage readers to pursue their dreams with humility and strength.

91. Arrogance is insecurity's self-defence (kyenkyen)

In 1976, the Ghanaian highlife musician Alhaji K. Frimpong, along with his Cubanos Fiesta band, released a song that has outlived its era: *Kyenkyen Bi Adi M'awu* ("A lesser thing has wounded my pride"). Nearly half a century later, it still stirs something raw and immediate. Many have sampled it, but none more notably than Reggie Rockstone, who brought it into the hip-life generation.

Though he bore the name *Alhaji*, K. Frimpong didn't make the pilgrimage to Mecca. In fact, he converted from Islam to Christianity in the 1970s. He died in October 2005, but his song lives on, an anthem of pride wounded by the unexpected.

What, then, is *kyenkyen*?

Known to botanists as *Antiaris africana*, and sometimes called the bark cloth tree in English, *kyenkyen* grows tall and straight. It keeps its branches high up, with a wide-spreading crown. Its bark, thick and fibrous, was once used to make sleeping mats and blankets. Strip off the bark, and you kill the tree. In death, though, it offers more: mushrooms sprout from the trunk – *dommo* and *sasee*, the latter ground into a soup as black as the star on Ghana's flag.

Yet *kyenkyen*, for all its height, is frail. Its timber is pale and soft, useful perhaps for making boxes or stools, but never the frame of a house. Stand beneath its wide shade and you may be shielded from the rain, but beware: a mere breeze can snap its branches. Its wood, like a boastful man, lacks core strength. It looks substantial until tested.

In that light, *Kyenkyen Bi Adi M'awu* takes on a bitter irony. It laments the

humiliation of being defeated by someone of lower standing. It's one thing to lose your beloved to a man of wisdom, stature or elegance. But to be outdone by someone flashy, shallow, and newly rich? That feels like being killed by a *kyenkyen*, crushed by something brittle.

The sentiment may sound snobbish, but it expresses something deeper: that arrogance often masks insecurity. The loudest man in the room may be shouting out of fear that he is not enough. When K. Frimpong sings that a "*kyenkyen* has wounded me," he is confessing the pain of having misjudged. He assumed the rival was beneath him, only to be proved wrong.

But then, he adds something curious. He calls himself *Obenekese bi akoo* ("a servant of a great king"). Does he mean he is a slave? Certainly not. The word *akoo*, in Twi, has suffered in translation. Western ears may hear "slave," but the better rendering is subject, one who belongs within a hierarchy, not as property, but as participant.

In Akan thought, even the king is someone's subject. A child is subject to an uncle, the uncle to the *abusapanyin*, the family head; he, in turn, is subject to the *odikro*, who is answerable to the *omanhene* and the *Otumfuo* – and even the *Otumfuo* bows, in reverence, to the ancestors and the Supreme Being. No one stands completely alone. All are woven into the great fabric.

This is a subtle idea, and a beautiful one. K. Frimpong is not diminishing himself when he calls himself *akoo*. He is acknowledging the moral order, a world where greatness is derived through honour, duty and relation. To be subject is not to be low; it is to belong.

Contrast this with *ɔnko*, the true slave, bought from without, owned and used. Or worse, the *domum*, war captives bound by chains. If such a one were to take your love, then, yes, *kyenkyen bi adi w'awu* indeed. The insult is sharper because the blow came from someone you thought could never touch you.

There is yet another proverb to ponder: *Ɔkyemfo se kwae abina a, ehu biara nni mu* (If a tarantula tells you to peel bark from a dead *kyenkyen* tree, you have nothing to fear). It is pure sarcasm. For if there is one thing a tarantula loves, it is hiding behind that bark. It is like asking a known thief to guard your purse. It sounds brave, but it is folly disguised as wisdom.

Kyenkyen is filled with such layers: easy to cut, wide to spread, dangerous in the wind, yet central to the lives of people and animals. Monkeys and antelopes feast on its fruit; hunters lie in wait near its roots. Its bark cures sore throats, and its leaves serve as medicine. But it remains fragile.

And so too are the arrogant: loudly rooted, thick-skinned, but often hollow at the core. Their defences are bark, not buttress.

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K. Frimpong's lament is still ours. We live in a world where loudness is mistaken for strength, and wealth, no matter how recent or tasteless, is mistaken for virtue. Yet time and wind reveal all. True stature lies in depth. Not in how wide your branches stretch, but how well your roots hold when the storm comes.

So, if a *kyenkyen* has indeed killed you, perhaps it is time to ask: why were you standing under it in the first place?

92. Too much humility is pride (asiapiriwa)

When I first heard that Cristiano Ronaldo was returning to Manchester United from Juventus in 2021, I was not surprised to learn he would be earning a king's ransom. He was, after all, Ronaldo. A little older, yes, but still possessed of the gravity that draws defenders and advertisers alike. As a Liverpool supporter, I confess a moment of envy.

A year earlier, the "GOAT" Lionel Messi had sought to depart Barcelona. When Jurgen Klopp, then Liverpool's manager, was asked whether the club would pursue him, he answered with characteristic candour: "Interest? Who doesn't want to have Messi in their team? But no chance. The numbers are absolutely not for us."

It was the era of the coronavirus pandemic, a time when the theatre of football seemed to totter under invisible burdens. Clubs, even storied ones, struggled with depleted coffers. Klopp was not bowing, but acknowledging. Liverpool could not, and would not, compete with the bottomless pockets of the likes of Manchester City.

Such words, modest and true, remind me of an Akan proverb: *Aberewa atomdee ne asiapiriwa* (The older woman's meat is *asiapiriwa*). That is, *Justicia ladanoides* – an unassuming herb, often overlooked, sometimes dismissed, yet capable. It grows wild, although one might coax it into the corner of a garden. Its stem is angular, its base swollen, its roots adventurous. A humble plant, no doubt, but one that knows its place and fills it well.

In Ghana and the Ivory Coast, the leaves and shoots of *asiapiriwa*, mildly

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slimy to the touch, are cooked into soups and stews. They are low in value, at least as measured by market price, and yet are sufficient to nourish. Often, the cook will mix in sweet potato leaves to temper the texture. No feast, perhaps, but a meal nonetheless.

One uproots the young plants after three to five weeks or else trims them above the soil, allowing them to sprout again with vigour. Every ten days, one may harvest anew. The plant survives the dry season in dormancy and wakes joyfully with the rains. Its seed lies still, patient and obedient, until the appointed time.

In folk medicine, *asiapiriwa* is not without honour. The leaves are applied to wounds or steeped into a decoction for indigestion. Some blend them with oil and salt as a remedy for cardiac ailments. In all this, the plant does not trumpet its usefulness; it simply is what it is, and does what it can.

So the proverb is not about resignation, nor even about frugality. It speaks to that paradoxical edge where humility becomes pride. For there is a kind of self-effacement so exaggerated that it circles back into vanity, as if to say, “See how modest I am!” The older woman may not have meat or garden greens of repute, but she is not destitute. *Asiapiriwa* is enough. More than enough, in fact, if one has eyes to see.

In football, Liverpool may never be the club that signs stars by headline and cheque-book. But they often grow their own and harvest in season. And perhaps, just perhaps, that refusal to overreach is not weakness, but strength in disguise.

Much like *asiapiriwa*.

93. Even powerhouses have their limits (peteprebi)

After Benjamin Franklin devised the lightning rod, a homeowner in Artois, France, boldly affixed one to his house. The local nobility were scandalised. With moral outrage worthy of a medieval inquisition, they thundered: “What! Shall we rend the lightning from the hand of God? Shall man presume to intercept the wrath of the Deity?” They called for the rod’s removal. It was, in their view, a blasphemous device, a product of “impious Deistical philosophy.” In their eyes, if lightning destroyed your home, the proper response was to call it Providence.

This reaction wasn’t so different from the old Roman habit of planting houseleeks (*Sempervivum tectorum*) on rooftops. Sacred to Jupiter, the houseleek was believed to ward off lightning. The logic, if one may call it that, was that Jupiter wouldn’t destroy what bore his sign. So, by this strange offering, the thunderbolt might be diverted.

Africa, too, has its traditions of warding off the wrath of the skies. Among the Akans, the branches of a hardy little tree called *peteprebi* (also known as *namprane* in Twi) were laid on roofs to guard against lightning. Whether the protection was thought to come from the gods or the plant’s intrinsic strength is not entirely clear. What is clear is that *peteprebi* is no trifling thing.

There is a proverb: *Peteprebi dua ye den, esono ntumi mu* (The *peteprebi* plant is so strong that even the elephant cannot pull it). A grand claim, of course. Yet its meaning is sound: even the powerful, the titanic, the thunderous, must meet their match. And sometimes that match is quiet, inconspicuous, growing stubbornly from the earth.

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Peteprebi, or *Gardenia ternifolia*, is a small tree of resilience. Its branches twist and clutch together, bearing sparse leaves and short, wiry twigs. When young, the bark is powdery to the touch. The flowers are sweet in scent, large and white, gradually fading into yellow as they age. Its fruit is oval and modestly brown. The wood, pale and bitter, is fine-grained, hard, and unwelcoming to insects. Handles of tools are shaped from it. The ashes make soap.

Its medicinal uses are as plentiful. Powdered root rubbed into incisions for leprosy and rheumatism. Decoctions for constipation, stomach aches, and fevers. Bark for asthma and for cleansing breast milk. Leaves for the itch, for syphilis, and even as an antidote to poisoned arrows. And through all this, the plant says little. It simply does.

Today, of course, no one in Artois would blink at a lightning rod. It is now standard, an uncontroversial fixture on modern homes, accepted without fuss. The fear that man was usurping divine thunder seems quaint to us now, though perhaps not entirely vanished.

There is something touching, and slightly tragic, in that impulse to attribute every misfortune to the will of unseen powers. It can rob us of the wisdom to prepare, to protect, to act. If lightning is always a curse from heaven, why bother with roofs at all? Why plant the houseleek, or *peteprebi*, or invent the rod?

The proverb reminds us that even the mighty are not invincible. And perhaps more importantly, the seemingly weak are not without their strengths. Whether it is a rod of metal or a branch of *peteprebi*, there is a time when man is not defying fate, but rightly using the gifts given to him, whether those gifts fall from the sky or rise from the ground.

94. 'I Don't Care' leads to 'Had I Known' (twiton)

One of the curious habits of human beings, and one of our most dangerous, is to treat the misfortunes of others as if they were part of someone else's story entirely. It is as though the thread has snapped between "your suffering" and "my concern". Yet interdependence is written into the very grain of life, as every wise tradition reminds us.

Saint Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, said that the human body has many parts, and each is needed if the body as a whole is to live. The Qur'an tells us that no soul can stand alone. That is to say, self-sufficiency is a myth, and the welfare of one person is never wholly detached from the fate of others.

Some laughed when the United States elected Donald Trump in 2016. It was America's problem, they said. Until it wasn't. The spirit of that election didn't remain confined to American soil; it stirred populist winds across Europe and beyond, leaving few nations untouched. Some would even say it lent momentum to Brexit.

Likewise, when COVID-19 emerged in Wuhan, many assumed it would stay there. "A far-off storm," they thought. But within months, borders closed, economies buckled, and hospitals overflowed from Milan to Minneapolis. The Akan, long before globalisation was a term, had already captured this lesson: *Wohunu se wo ynko abɔdwesɛ rehye a, sa nsuo si wo dee bo* (If your neighbour's beard is on fire, pour water over your own). Be prepared because the blaze is coming.

There is another Akan proverb, more poetic and tragic in tone: *Twiton*

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kakyere *ɔtokotaka se: 'nsa nyankyerene yaree' nti na ɔda awiam* (The mother-in-law's tongue told the velvetleaf desmodium not to heal the sandpaper tree. Now, it withers in the sun). The tale behind the proverb runs thus. The sandpaper tree (*Ficus exasperata*) had begun to bleed sap from cracks in its bark. The velvetleaf desmodium (*Desmodium velutinum*) resolved to offer healing. But the *twitɔn*, the mother-in-law's tongue (*Dracaena trifasciata*), dismissed the idea. What was the sickness of another tree to her?

The desmodium stayed its hand. The sandpaper tree died. Humans came to harvest the firewood, and in the process, they cut down the mother-in-law's tongue to bind their bundle. Now exposed to the sun, drying and cracking, *twitɔn* had her revelation: had the sandpaper tree been healed, she would not now be withering in its place. How often does the road from "I don't care" lead to "Had I known"?

The *twitɔn* plant itself is something of a paradox. It has no stem, yet stands tall. Its long, sword-like leaves, marbled with white and edged with defiance, rise firmly from a thick rhizome. The plant offers more than its indifference in the tale suggests. Its strong fibres were once used as thread, for bowstrings, and to tie the navels of newborns. Its leaves treat eye troubles and sores; its boiled roots, combined with palm nuts and eggs, make a tonic for pregnant women.

The *ɔkototaka* (the desmodium) is a humbler-looking shrub, clothed in fine hairs and commonly found in the forest's open spaces. Its roots and pepper are used to treat blood in the urine, while its leaves, brewed into a decoction, ease diarrhoea. Both plants heal, or can heal, if they are not discouraged.

The proverb is not about plants at all, but about people, communities, even nations. It is about the wisdom of caring in time. It is dangerous to think the crack in your neighbour's wall cannot become a flood at your door. That another's illness or injustice is too far removed to concern you. If you can help, help. It is noble and may one day be necessary. The mother-in-law's tongue stood proud, but it stood alone. And when the fire came, there was no one left to water her roots.

95. The nouveau riche flaunts their wealth (atawa)

There is a difference between being wealthy and being seen to be wealthy, a truth more familiar to the ancient moralists than to modern influencers. We live in a world where signals matter, often more than substance. A handbag, for instance, is no longer just for carrying items. A Gucci bag, with its conspicuous branding and €870 price tag, wants to be noticed. It demands attention. The Bottega Veneta, which may cost upwards of €6,000, is altogether more discreet, no outward badge, no noise. Those who know, know. Those who don't are not meant to.

This difference between Gucci and Bottega is not about leather. It is about people. The Akan proverb *ahwenɛ pa nkasa* (fine beads do not rattle) describes the old rich. Their wealth, like their speech, is restrained, unshowy, content. These are the people whose children you might sit beside in school without ever suspecting that their family owns land, stocks, and subtle influence. They don't post pictures from first class on KLM. They don't need to. Their confidence is quiet. Their presence is understated. They are the Bottega bag.

Then come the *mtɔ nam da*, those who "have never bought meat before," but now, flush with fortune, wish to chop liver with an axe. Their ascent is recent, their background humble, their achievement real but raw. Think of lottery winners, musicians who have gone viral overnight. Their wealth is like freshly minted gold – bright, hard, and a little too loud.

We often judge them harshly, and perhaps too quickly. Their boastfulness may be the only armour they have against the shame of what they once were.

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They may say the price of their watch is not to impress you, but to reassure themselves. Still, the proverb whispers: *Samanta, wonim pae a, wonto atawa pa* (Calpocalyx, you may know how to explode, but you are not yet the oil bean tree). Equal in volume, perhaps. Not in grace.

The *samanta* (*Calpocalyx brevibracteatus*), sometimes called the ghost oil bean, produces pods that crack open and fling their seeds like its relative, *atawa* (*Pentaclethra macrophylla*). But it lacks the stature and subtlety of its cousin. In looks, it imitates. In reputation, it falls short. Not because it is useless; *samanta*'s bark treats sores, its seeds feed the hungry, its ashes can serve as salt. But *atawa* does more, and with less fuss. Its extracts heal, its seeds ease pain, even abort, and its presence in traditional medicine is wide and sure. *Samanta* shouts. *Atawa* need not.

And then some live outside this dance of display entirely. The *mefura ntomago*, the threadbare, whose clothes are worn but clean, who stay out of reckless games because they know the cost of replacement. These are the musicians who begin in bare rooms with honest lyrics, the farmers who don't know the name Gucci, and don't mind. They are poor, but not impoverished. They live within their means, and perhaps sleep better for it.

Yet let us not judge too swiftly. The *ankore-hunu* (the empty barrels that make the most noise) may be suffering in ways we do not see. The person who was once mocked for being ugly may overcompensate with glamour. The one who was told they would never succeed may feel compelled to broadcast every sign of progress. Their wealth, or beauty, or cleverness, becomes proof, a retort to those who doubted.

Wealth is only an illustration. The principle holds for looks, intelligence, fame, and even virtue. The genuinely wise seldom declare it. The truly beautiful don't boast. When they do, it is often because something else inside them is starving for attention.

We all carry a bit of each character within us, the *abwenee pa* and the *nto nam da*, the poised and the insecure. And until we have walked in their shoes (or carried their bags), we ought to hold back our mockery. As the Akans would say, *Aboagyewaa* has her pomade; let her choose how she applies it. And let us remember that noise is no sure measure of worth. Some trees explode in the forest. Others simply grow.

96. The feeble succeed the mighty (brɔferɛ)

From a distance, a forest appears as one great green body; dense, unified, majestic. Yet step within its shaded boundaries and you will find that what once seemed a singular mass is, in fact, a congregation of distinct lives, trees standing each in its own silence, each bearing its own story. The Akans, thus, say, *Abusua te se kwaeɛ; wowɔ akyiri a, ɛye kusuu, wopini ho a, na wobunu se dua korɔ biara wɔ ne siberɛ* (The family is like a forest: from afar, it is thick, but within, every tree has its own place).

Unity, yes, but not uniformity. The same might be said of churches, nations, or old boarding houses. In all these, the eye of the outsider sees harmony, but the insider knows better. Individual responsibility lies buried beneath the leafy pretence of the collective.

In the closed forest, a few trees soar above the rest, growing strong and lofty. But in doing so, they cast such shade that little light reaches the forest floor. What results is an ecosystem unbalanced, lacking the undergrowth that might have helped to bind and buffer. And so, these towering elders, once the pride of the woodland, stand exposed. When the wind howls through the gaps, they suffer alone. The Akans warn us: *Dua korɔ gye mframa a, ebu* (When a single tree braves the wind, it breaks).

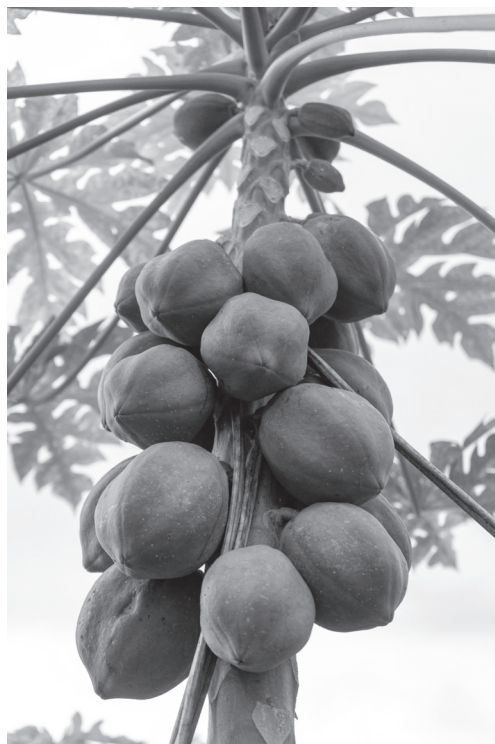
After the storm, what follows? A certain small resurrection. The papaw, known in Akan as *brɔferɛ*, rises where the mighty once fell. *Odupɔn tutu a, brɔferɛ na esi ne anan* (When a mighty tree falls, it is the pawpaw that replaces it). There is melancholy here. We don't just mourn the lost; we regard the replacement with

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faint contempt. The papaw is soft, hollow, branchless – hardly a fitting heir to giants.

Still, there is something instructive in this change of guard. Perhaps we ought to think less about greatness and more about usefulness. The papaw may not command awe, but it nourishes. It grows quickly, adapts easily and, with the intervention of a clever farmer, even the male tree, ordinarily fruitless, can be persuaded to bear. A cut here, a hole there, and life answers. As they say in the village, we have always been scientists.

Once, pawpaw roots were used to treat yaws and piles. But caution is wisdom; pregnant women, we're told, should avoid it. Its leaves, dried and soaked in water, make a yellowish draught to soothe the belly. That same water can be used to lift stubborn stains from clothing. Wrap meat in the leaves before cooking, and the fibres yield. Even pigs enjoy it. Indeed, it is hard to find a part of the papaw tree that serves no purpose.



Pawpaw - Carica papaya

Its usefulness does invite trouble. *Nsee*, the naked-faced barbets, flock to the fruit, often before we get to it. They seem to pay the price for their fondness. The elders observe: *Brɔ̃fɛrɛ a ɛ̃ɛ dɛ na ɛ̃nsee kɔ so ayie* (It is the sweet papaw that brings

the barbet to its funeral). There is no lovely thing without some cost, no blessing without a shadow.

How can you tell if a pawpaw is sweet? Look beneath it. If you see a stick lying nearby, then someone has already tested it. Hence the saying: *Brɔfɛrɛ a ɛyɛ dɛ ɛna abaa da aseɛ* (Where the papaw is sweet, there lies a stick). It is a testimony: all good things leave a trace.

In the bush, a pawpaw can be a traveller's salvation. Parched and weary, you may find in it the water you lack. But beware how and where you consume it. The fruit is rich and juicy, and if you sit on a damp log while eating, you risk double disgrace: wet mouth and wet bottom alike. As the Akans quip, *Wotena dufɔkyɛɛ so di brɔfɛrɛ a, wo to fɔ, w'ano nso fɔ*. In some acts, the shame is not singular.

And what of its culinary delights? Mix powdered *nkyewee* (corn nuts) with ripe pawpaw, and you may find yourself biting your tongue in delight. There is little in the world to compare.

So, if the giants fall, let the pawpaw rise. They may be lesser in grandeur, but not in grace. Perhaps it is the quiet ones, the soft-spoken, the easily overlooked, who feed us best. In the end, it may be more blessed to nourish than to tower.

97. Social proof (bɔbɔmfradaa)

When faced with uncertainty, we rarely rely on reason alone. Instead, we turn our gaze sideways, to see what others are doing. A curious thing, but common. For example, when you find yourself in a foreign country needing a mobile number, you are unlikely to conduct an exhaustive review of all networks. Rather, you choose what most others have chosen. If many use it, surely it can't be the worst. You're not seeking the best; you are simply dodging the worst.

This instinct goes deeper than phone plans. It reaches into the murky waters of courtship. Studies have shown that we often find a person more attractive when others already desire them. A phenomenon called *mate choice copying*. It is not unique to humans; birds do it, fish do it, and even certain insects fall into line.

What we are dealing with is the power of social proof. The choices of others become a form of signal, a way to hedge against uncertainty. If everyone else wants it, it must be worth wanting, or so the logic goes. It may explain the baffling appeal of the rake, the libertine, the celebrated Casanova. His many admirers, rather than putting us off, seem to lend him value. Conversely, the faithful partner, who evokes no competition, might be unjustly judged as a dull bargain. If no one else wants what we have, do we begin to doubt its worth?

The Akans, with their clear-eyed insight into human nature, have captured this tendency in a proverb. We've already heard one in our previous reflection: *Bryferɛ a ɛɛde na abaa da aseɛ* (It is the sweet pawpaw tree that has a stick beneath it). The implication is simple: goodness doesn't hide itself. It is plucked, pursued,

and publicly valued. And because it is valued, others are drawn to it. Not unlike the modern notion that popularity is a kind of evidence.

Another proverb, still rooted in the world of plants, says: *Bɔbɔmfradaa de nti na amamfoɔ hunu a na worepere no* (People are drawn to the fluted pumpkin when they see it because of its delicious flavour). Again, we see the same principle. The goodness of a thing is often known by how eagerly others approach it. It is no stretch to say that the ancients understood the principle of social proof long before behavioural scientists gave it a name.

Now let us consider the fluted pumpkin itself (*Telfairia occidentalis*), a plant native to Africa and much beloved in Nigeria, especially among the Igbo, who call it *Ugu*. A climbing plant, it stretches itself across the ground and other plants, seeking support with curling tendrils. Its fruit, large and gourdlike, is green outside and yellow within, containing seeds that are rich in oil. These seeds, much like almonds in flavour, may be boiled, roasted, or pounded into soups.

But the fluted pumpkin is more than a source of flavour. Its utility stretches into the household and the apothecary. The fibrous stems, once dried, make fine sponges for washing. The young leaves and shoots are eaten as vegetables, and in traditional medicine, the leaves serve to treat ailments such as anaemia, convulsions, and malaria. (Though, as always, we must tread carefully: the roots are toxic.)

The proverb concerning the fluted pumpkin is no idle saying. It reflects something deep in the human psyche: our persistent belief that shared choice reveals hidden virtue. It is not entirely misguided. There is safety in the wisdom of the crowd – sometimes. But it is also true that popularity can be deceptive. Not all things plucked are worth eating. The wise learn to distinguish between true sweetness and mere trend.

What is most remarkable is that such insights were not discovered in laboratories but lived out in villages. Our ancestors, whom some might call unlettered, were in truth astute observers of human nature. Their wisdom came in proverbs. They saw, as plainly as any scholar, that in times of uncertainty, we lean on the choices of others; often not to choose what is best, but simply to avoid being wrong alone.

98. If you wish for evil, you suffer too (gyedua)

At the Techiman Central Station, two ancient trees keep their silent watch. Beneath their sprawling canopies sit bread sellers, ticket touts, lotto vendors and idle chatterers. Once there were four such trees, but two were cut down in a recent wave of development. In place of one, a statue of a chief now stands. That detail is not accidental.

A whisper persists among locals that *something* is buried beneath these trees, and that this is why Techiman market thrives, drawing traders from across West Africa. It may sound like superstition, but the suspicion holds weight. More than one Akan town is rooted in a similar mystery. What is buried is not just a charm, but a foundation. For these are no ordinary trees. They are *gyedua*.

You'll find them across Akan territory, standing before palaces, along town streets, near shrines. From Bekwai to Berekum, from Nkaw to Nsawkaw, from Kumasi to Wiawso, *gyedua* remains an elder among the living. Botanists call them *Ficus benghalensis*, *Ficus religiosa*, or *Ficus umbellata*. In Ghana, they are recognised by their thick branches and their long, wandering roots. These roots stretch far and deep. So deep, in fact, that the Akans say: *Gyedua si abɔnten nso ne bini wɔ fie* (The *gyedua* may stand by the roadside, but its roots are in the house).

It is a parable of belonging. A child may dwell under the father's roof, yet the mother's kin claims his blood. Roots defy the eye. The truth, as ever, lies beneath.

Don't confuse *gyedua* with *nkrangyedua* (*Jatropha curcas*), the hedge-shrub with oily fruits. *Gyedua* is no hedge. It is central. Sacred. Royal. In older days,

when a chief was installed, a *gyedua* was planted, sometimes by the chief's linguist, the *Okyeame*. And before planting, *something* was buried, perhaps tokens or prayers, to consecrate the place.

Should a town relocate, the *gyedua* was planted anew, marking the centre of life. But when towns fell to conquest, the invaders cut down every *gyedua* in sight. The act was both symbolic and surgical. A removal of soul. Hence, before a ruler set out for war, he would go to the *gyedua* and swear not to return in shame, not to let the enemy lay axe to that sacred tree. A chief might claim a victory in battle, but he would credit the *gyedua*. And sometimes, as a gesture of homage, the skull of a defeated general would be buried at its foot.

Each ruler, if he could, planted at least one *gyedua* in his reign. It was a mark of his time. Chiefs still appear in public under state umbrellas, turned and adjusted by attendants to provide maximum shade. These umbrellas are not merely ceremonial; they are portable *gyedua*, reminders of the real tree they once sat beneath.

The tree walks with the chief in life and waits for him in death. Should a storm snap a branch, the ruler pours libation and marks his brow with red clay. To burn its wood as firewood is forbidden. And when the chief dies, the people do not say the man has passed; they say the great tree has fallen: *Odupɔn atutu*.

So sacred is the *gyedua* that even honey within it is approached with caution. *Ewoɔ dɔre wɔ gyedua mu a, wode nyansa na eyie* (If you find honey in the *gyedua*, you must harvest it with wisdom). A delight you dare not take. A reward tangled with risk. There is in this proverb a truth not only agricultural, but moral. Some gifts must be handled with more than appetite.



Gyedua, Techiman

The tree is more than a gathering place for the living. It also haunts the invisible. Spirits are said to rest beneath its shade. In olden times, priests performed rituals there. Hence the Akan proverb: *Kɔmfɔ se gyedua a esi abɔnten mmu a, ɔbekyere deɛ ɔbekɔm asee* (If the priest prophesies that the roadside *gyedua* will fall, let him tell us where he will perform his rites). It is a pointed rebuke to those who call for destruction without thought for the consequences. A man who curses the structure that shelters him must ask where he will stand when the roof falls.

This is no abstract notion. One thinks of the political appointee who secretly prays for the fall of the very party that raised him. Or the bitter voice in the crowd who wishes for collapse just to say, “I told you so,” not knowing he will be buried in the rubble.

Other cultures, too, have held fig trees in reverence. In Buddhism and Hinduism, the fig is holy. It was under such a tree that the Buddha received his enlightenment. In the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve, newly shamed, reached for fig leaves to hide their nakedness. The oldest tree on record for which we know the exact planting date is a fig in Sri Lanka, planted in 288 BCE.

And so we return to Techiman, where two ancient trees remain. Perhaps something is indeed buried beneath them. But what matters most is what stands above, and the wisdom to know that the fall of such a tree is not only a loss for the tree. It is a loss for all who stood beneath its shade.

99. Money answereth all things (mmire)

Among those who most passionately warned against wealth, few spoke more plainly than Seneca, the Stoic philosopher of Rome. He was a contemporary of the Apostle Paul, brother to Gallio (the same Gallio who shrugged off the chance to prosecute Paul in Acts 18), and tutor to Nero, one of history's most tragic ironies. Seneca's writings abound with exhortations to live simply, disdain riches and pursue virtue. And yet, he himself was fabulously wealthy.

Many cried hypocrisy. But in *On the Happy Life*, Seneca clarified that it is not wealth that is the danger, but the soul's dependence upon it. Money is a servant to the wise and a tyrant to the foolish. And still, he admitted, with some weariness, that money brings comfort. A man may sleep better with a full belly and dry roof than with none at all. It is hard to dispute the proverb: money answereth all things.

Our Akan elders put it differently. *Sika te se mpempenaa, ɔbaakofoɔ ntu.* (Money is like mushrooms; one person alone cannot gather it all). *Mpempenaa* refers both to a game children play and a tiny white mushroom that appears in great numbers on termite mounds. They sprout like blessings in the rainy season, so many and so fleeting that one pair of hands cannot keep up.

Mushrooms, like money, must be treated with care. They spring from death, feeding on rot, hidden beneath leaves and logs. They are not plants, and certainly not animals. They are their own kingdom. Many can be eaten. Some, only once. And so the elders warn: *Dua mmu ntɔɔ fam a, yenni ho mmire* (If a tree has not fallen, we do not eat the mushrooms on it). Never eat a mushroom from a living

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tree. It is an old safeguard, likely born from bitter experience and graves filled too soon.

The mushroom may be a metaphor, but it is also very real. *Dommo* (*Volvariella volvacea*) is a personal favourite. You'll find it on old palm trunks, rounded and covered in a veil, what we call *nkapowa*. In palm nut soup, it brings a flavour that meat sometimes cannot match.

There is also *sasee* (*Coprinellus micaceus*), delicate and pale brown, which grows in clusters around tree stumps and turns one's soup black. *Sibire* or *simire* (*Termitomyces schimperi*) grows on termite mounds and often rewards the forager with a bonus: a tortoise, which shares your taste. There is *kyikyiky*, which prefers solitude and comes with the rains. And *tweaworodo*, similar in form to *sibire*, but with thinner stems and a shorter stature. Lastly, *nkankuma* (*Pluteus cervinus*) appears on decaying wood, its cap darkening with age.

Most of a mushroom's life is hidden. It thrives in silence, and when it appears, it does so swiftly. You may blink and miss it. Perhaps that is why another Akan proverb warns: *Obi ntu mmire nsie sie so* (No one gathers mushrooms only to leave them back on the termite mound). If you find value, guard it. If you gain wealth, don't parade it where others may steal it. Even Eden had a serpent.

Light work is sometimes likened to mushroom picking: easy and satisfying. And yet, one must at least go to the bush. There is no harvest for the lazy. If someone demands profit without effort, you may remind them: *Nye apotoyowa mu na yetu domo* (We do not harvest mushrooms from a clay mashing bowl). The work must fit the reward.

But let us not forget that mushrooms are both tasty and medicinal. Our ancestors knew this. They knew what eased asthma and soothed the joints. They ate for health, not only for fullness. They did not need peer-reviewed journals; they had wisdom instead.

And still, for all its nutrition, *nkapowa* is not meat. Few cheer when the soup arrives with no trace of flesh. *Tuku*, meatless soup, is better than nothing, but barely. Just as mushrooms must be supplemented with meat, life, too, must be augmented with means. We must not be ruled by money, but we must not scorn it either. There is a kind of freedom in having enough to say "no" with dignity. In a world that often trades integrity for convenience, that kind of wealth is not greed; it is armour.

Pat Thomas sang that money is blood. Super Yaw Ofori said it is youth. Amakye Dede, a warrior. Slim Young, a glue for kinship. Lumba crowned it king. And I, perhaps with less poetry but no less conviction, say that money is life. Not because it *ought* to be. But because, in the world we live in, it very often *is*.

100. Your downfall benefits someone (onyina)

It was a Saturday evening, one of those inescapable entertainment nights in boarding school, where the mood was usually cheerful, the music loud, and emotions kept just beneath the skin. That particular evening should have been no different, except that it was.

A senior, more confident than charming, took the floor and danced with a girl I knew well. “Akonno Ba” played in the background, its rhythm lifting the crowd, but not me. There was nothing in me that longed to date her; I had no plans, no desires of that kind. And yet, as they danced so close, I felt a hurt I could not explain, and certainly could not show. The worst part, perhaps, was that she was enjoying it.

I stayed, pretending to be amused, clapping along, laughing where expected. But inside, I was anything but. I never listened to “Akonno Ba” the same way again. To this day, she remains a friend, never having known what a simple dance once cost me.

It is strange how a song, a tree, a word, can become soaked in memory. Kojo Antwi’s music, for instance, often evokes that bittersweet sense; stories wrapped in metaphor, sorrow dancing with beauty. In *Atentrehuo*, he speaks of a man seeking brighter days abroad, buffeted by chance and chased by the eagle (that is, the police). Why *atentrehuo*?

The word, in Twi, refers to silk cotton, specifically that of two giant trees: *onyina* (*Ceiba pentandra*) and *akata* (*Bombax buonopozense*). The *onyina* is enormous, towering over many forests in Ghana. But its size is deceptive. Though it

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grows tall and broad, it is not always trusted for timber. Its wood decays quickly unless cured fast; insects find it delicious. Its strength is more theatrical than lasting.

Its height, however, offers shelter. Black kites perch upon its branches, safe from the reach of men, and from such positions, they act with impunity. Thus, the proverb: *Onyina na emaa asansa dii bamee* (It is the *onyina* that allows the black kite to behave with disrespect). In other words, it is the greatness of a person that often emboldens their followers to be rude on their behalf. We may not intend to cause harm, but our stature can permit others, sometimes for good, often not.



Onyina - Ceiba pentandra

The *onyina* is covered in thorns when young, and its base spreads into broad buttresses (*adukro*), perfect for hiding objects. Its fruit contains many seeds, each clinging to cotton floss, commercially known as kapok, or *atentrehuo*. This cotton was used to stuff mattresses and pillows, but its metaphorical value runs deeper.

As the tree ages and softens, it welcomes new tenants. Woodpeckers, and barbets in particular, drill into it. The elders say: *Ekaa nsee nko a, anka onyina awu* (If it were only up to the naked-faced barbet, the *onyina* would die). The meaning is painfully clear: someone's downfall is often someone else's opportu-

nity. The barbet makes their nest in the dead *onyina* tree. The tree must die before the bird finds its home.

The second tree, *akata* or *akɔnkodɛɛ*, also produces *atentrehuo*. Its youthful bark is equally thorny. In the dry season, it sheds its leaves and bursts into red flowers, bright and festive, often used as Christmas decorations. For many, Christmas is incomplete without *akata*. Children once stuck the flowers to their cheeks, mimicking Father Christmas with cheerful solemnity.

The immature fruit, when pierced and spun, serves as a child's game. The silk cotton from *akata* is finer than that of *onyina*, whiter and softer. Its bark serves the farmer well, used in roofing sheds, fencing gardens, and even loading Dane guns. The corky thorns can be carved into small sculptures. *Akata*, however, grows slowly, unlike its cousin.

But what unites them both is what happens when the fruits ripen and burst. The *atentrehuo* catches the wind, rising, floating, wandering in the air for hours. It drifts without anchor, without certainty. In Kojo Antwi's *Atentrehuo*, the image becomes a metaphor for the immigrant's life: rootless, untethered, at the mercy of wind and border.

And here we come to a hard truth. For every *onyina* that falls, for every tall man whose strength collapses, there is a bird waiting to build a home. Life is not symmetrical. Your loss may be someone's ladder. Your stumble may create space for another's stride. This is not necessarily evil; it is simply the way of things. But it is no less painful.

The dance you endure may become someone else's joy. The song you cannot bear may play in another's triumph. The tree you mourn may provide cotton for a stranger's comfort.

This is not a call to bitterness. Rather, it is a call to wisdom. We must learn to see these moments for what they are. In every humiliation, there may lie an unseen blessing. And in every advantage, a cost we do not yet understand.

The great trees fall, the silk floats, and the wind carries all, both the broken and the blessed, onward.

Section K: Truth and Fearfulness

This part of the book talks about honesty and bravery. It discusses how it's important to stay true to yourself even when faced with difficulties or temptations. It explores the idea that truth isn't afraid of being questioned and looks at how things like water and diamonds can teach us unexpected lessons. The essays in this section encourage readers to be brave and to see through the lies and illusions around them. They also talk about dealing with pressure to act a certain way and the dangers of exaggerating the truth. Overall, these stories aim to inspire people to be fearless and always seek the truth, no matter what challenges they face.

101. The truth is not afraid of being challenged (ɔdom)

Truth, if it is truth at all, has no reason to fear being tested. It is lies that tremble under cross-examination, not truth. But our human search for truth has seldom been gentle. It has often involved ordeal, violence and the tragic assumption that certainty justifies risk. The Akan had a proverb for this: *Wowe dom fe a, na ekyere se bone nni wo tirimu* (If you vomit after drinking ɔdom, your conscience is clear). The logic is simple, terrifying and irreversible: drink poison; if you live, you are innocent.

The ɔdom tree (*Erythrophleum suaveolens*), also called *potrodum*, is tall and commanding, with rough, dark bark and a blood-red slash beneath, as if nature itself marked it for sacred use. Its bark, when boiled, yields a potent and quick-acting poison. It earned the name *red water tree* because it bleeds.

In older times, especially in cases of suspected adultery, when the private became public and suspicion found no easy proof, the ordeal of ɔdom was invoked. The woman, almost always the woman, would be brought before the shrine. She would drink a potion made from the tree's bark. If she vomited, it meant her heart was clean. If she didn't, her body would swell, and death would soon follow. Justice, so it was believed, had been served.

It is easy for us, sitting safely in our own century, to judge these practices as cruel or absurd. And in many ways, they were. But let us not be too quick to congratulate ourselves. What we call forensic certainty can also kill; what we trust as legal truth can also be wrong. At least the Akan knew that invoking ɔdom was no light matter. One proverb cautioned: *Nnipa dom gyina ho a, wommisa dua*

dom (If there are witnesses, you don't ask for the ordeal tree). That is, if the truth can be found through peaceful means, don't turn to poison. Don't gamble with a life if honesty can be discovered without blood.

The tree itself is a contradiction, much like human justice. Its wood is strong and termite-proof, useful for building homes that last. And yet, within its bark lies the power to kill in minutes. It was used to poison animals like the grasscutter and applied, paradoxically, to heal: treating sores, numbing pain. It's a builder, a healer, and a destroyer.

In Akan tradition, adultery was not a public crime unless the woman belonged to a king. For ordinary people, infidelity was a private affair, handled through complex channels of family and apology. The husband couldn't confront his wife directly but had to go through the *abusuapanyin*, the head of her family. If a confession came, reparations followed. It is curious, this dance around truth. No one reached directly; everything passed through elders, emissaries and ritual. Perhaps they knew that truth is a delicate thing that needs to be approached with reverence, as one might approach the *dom* tree itself. Touch it lightly, and it may shelter you. Press it too hard, and it may kill.

Even in those days, not everyone accepted the verdicts of ordeal. Innocent people, no doubt, died. Guilt, like innocence, was sometimes determined by biology – how the body reacted, not what the heart held. We can only pray for those lost: *May their rest be peaceful.*

But still, something in the proverb holds fast. *The truth is not afraid of being challenged.* Real truth has nothing to fear; not from inquiry, not from scrutiny, not even from poison. It may suffer under suspicion, but it cannot be undone by it. What is true remains true, even if no one believes it. What is false cannot become true, no matter how many judges declare it so.

We would do well to remember this in our own trials, whether in courts or conversations. Before we invoke our own modern versions of *dom*, before we ruin a reputation, sever a relationship or demand a confession, let us ask whether gentler paths might lead to the same truth.

Let the tree remain in the forest. Let the red water stay in the bark. If witnesses are present, if kindness can still uncover honesty, then by all means, spare the poison. Truth does not need to roar to be real. It only needs to be heard.

102. Delayed gratification is wisdom (nkamfoɔ)

Every nation has its memorials, some carved in stone, others in language. Ghana, with its gift for metaphor, often etches memory in the minds. A jerrycan becomes a “Kufuor Gallon,” a bus turns into a “Kufuor Bus,” and even the emaciated necks of a starving people are named the “Rawlings Chain.” Such is the poetry of necessity.

Rawlings chains marked the great famine in the 1980s. I was young, but my memory of it was eating *nkamfoɔ*. Bitter yam, as it is sometimes called, is not a food one chooses; it is a food one endures. It smells unpleasant, tastes worse, and if prepared carelessly, may well kill you. Its tubers are laced with a natural poison, and only after days of steeping can they be safely consumed. Yet it saved lives during the famine of 1983 and 1984. When every other crop failed, *nkamfoɔ* flourished. And for that, we owe it our reluctant gratitude.

The plant itself climbs contrary to all expectations – from left to right, rather than the way of the yam. Its stubborn reversal mirrors its character: resistant, unpleasant, and indispensable when everything else fails. It grows where other crops would wither. It is insurance against the worst, a bitter lifeline.

In Akan wisdom, the bitter yam itself speaks: *Nkamfoɔ se ‘Mene nwaduro mpere da’* (I do not trouble the mortar). It is not pounded. It doesn’t pretend to be pleasant. It is, in every way, a lesson in embracing hardship directly, not dressing it up.

There is another proverb: *Eduru se yede nkamfoɔ beko atwee a, anka kooko bedi mu bi* (If it becomes necessary to carry bitter yam on a hunting expedition,

then even the taro will be welcome). The point is that if you must settle for the worst, then take along what's slightly better too. Even the least desirable thing can have its use in a crisis.

In fact, *nkamfoɔ* becomes a metaphor for moral and strategic living. For there is a temptation in human affairs to choose the sweet path now and ignore the bitterness that follows. Water yam (*afaseɛ*) offers its pleasure up front, but comes with a price later. Bitter yam is harsh at the beginning, but leaves no unpleasant surprise. Hence the elders' counsel: *Se wobedi afaseɛ ama n'afa w'aseɛ deɛ, di nkamfoɔ ma yenkamfo wo* (If eating water yam will take you by surprise, then eat bitter yam and let us congratulate you).

You see, what the proverb teaches is no different from what any moral teacher, prophet or parent has tried to say for millennia: *Delayed gratification is a mark of wisdom*. Pleasure now, cost later – that is the road to ruin. Cost now, benefit later; that is the path of discipline, and often, the only route to lasting success.

This is not just dietary advice. It applies to every sphere of life. How often do we choose the immediate thrill over the long-term good? A sugary treat over health. Laziness over discipline. Popularity over principle. The danger is not in failing to enjoy life. The danger is in mistaking ease for goodness and comfort for truth.

Let us not pretend, either, that choosing the bitter yam is easy. It rarely is. Whether it be hard work, patience in suffering, or choosing to love someone difficult, these things don't taste sweet in the moment. But they build the soul in ways the sweet things never could.

It is here, perhaps, that the spiritual lesson lies. *Nkamfoɔ* suggests that bitterness is not always a punishment; sometimes it is a preparation. Sometimes the things that disgust us most are the very things that sustain us when the feast is gone and famine sets in.

So if the only thing left is *nkamfoɔ*, eat it. Eat it with the grim dignity of someone who understands that today's bitterness may be tomorrow's blessing. And when others wrinkle their noses or flee in search of easier fare, remember this: *"Better to endure the bitter and survive, than enjoy the sweet and be undone."* And perhaps, if we are wise, we will even learn to be thankful for the bitter yam. For it taught us to choose well.

103. Embellishment leads to disbelief (*wisa*)

It is a curious thing about human beings; we long to be liked, and so we often believe that we are. A smile reassures us, a kind word disarms us, and applause convinces us that we are welcome. But not all smiles are blessings. Some are traps.

There is an Akan saying with the sharp edge of experience: *Obi sere kyere wo a, wobunu n'anom na wonbunu ne tirim* (If someone smiles at you, you see their mouth, but not their mind). One need not be a cynic to know this is true. Every one of us has, at some point, trusted the wrong smile. And perhaps, regretted it. Today's researchers may talk of *Duchenne smiles*, eye crinkles, and the 43 facial muscles used in authentic laughter. Yet even a science of smiling cannot protect the heart from the consequences of misplaced trust.

The Akan proverb *Anim se nkyene, atikɔ wisa* (Salt in your face, guinea grains behind you) puts it even more plainly. Salt and smiles have much in common: both make life pleasant, both are dangerous in excess, and both can be faked. But *wisa* (guinea grain) is another matter. It doesn't pretend to be pleasant. They sting, they burn, they announce their presence with obvious heat. That is their virtue. They are at least honest.

It is the contrast that matters. One puts salt in front: courtesy, praise, flattery. But behind the back? *Wisa*. Gossip, sabotage, silent curses. And always with a smile, sometimes a very large one.

Wisa is a formidable little spice. Two varieties – *fam-wisa* and *sorowisa* – are known across West Africa for their flavour and their power. They are used in medicine, in love potions, and in rituals. One cheers at the thought of them,

another shudders. And perhaps that is how fake affection should make us feel: a kind of uneasy admiration mixed with caution.

Why do we fall for it? Because we confuse friendliness with friendship, cheer with character, and smiles with sincerity. We are more interested in being liked than in knowing who truly likes us. We don't want discernment; we want approval. But flattery, like too much salt, spoils the stew. As another proverb warns: *Woto asem mu nkyene bebrebe a, yebua wo fɔ* (If you put too much salt in a case, we find you guilty). In other words, when a thing is too sweet, too agreeable, something is likely amiss. Excess makes us suspicious, and rightly so.

You don't need to be paranoid, of course. But you must be alert. There are many smiles in the world, and not all of them mean well. Some are camouflaged. Others are currency. Some are given freely, others traded for influence. A wise person learns to read the difference.

This doesn't mean you must harden your heart. That too would be a kind of deceit, only directed inward. No, what is needed is what the ancients called prudence: the habit of seeing the world as it is, not merely as we wish it to be. Smiles are lovely, but not infallible. Applause may be genuine, or it may be noise masking a knife.

So the next time someone beams at you too long, claps too loudly, or nods with too much enthusiasm, pause. You may be facing salt, or *wisa*. And while one is a seasoning, the other is a warning. Let your heart be open, but not defenceless. Or, to put it in modern terms: trust, but don't be a fool.

104. We cannot know all mysteries (asedua)

Few institutions promise so much and yet remain so deeply mysterious as marriage. It begins with joy, moves through seasons of familiarity, and, sometimes, lands in the misery that compels one party to say: “Enough.” Now, in Akan society, the official act of divorce appears deceptively simple. You only present a bottle of wine to the other’s family, and the matter is, in theory, resolved. But that is only the surface. Beneath this simplicity lies a mesh of complexity woven from duty, expectation, and shame. A bottle may sever the tie, but it does not silence the elders.

The moment divorce is mentioned, the elders arrive as concerned relatives and moral police. They come bearing proverbs with a clear aim: reconciliation. *Opanyin nni afoofi mma asedua mfo* (An elder does not rest at home and allow drying cowpeas to be drenched). The marriage, in this metaphor, is the cowpea, set out to dry after harvest. A downpour, a divorce, would ruin it. And so, the elder stirs, stands, and intervenes.

This, of course, can be a source of great distress to the one suffering. When everyone around you urges you to stay, to endure, to “make it work,” you may feel silenced. But another proverb speaks directly to this pain: *Dee ɔda ne gya na nim sedee esi hyehye no fa* (He who lies by the fire knows how it burns). In other words, only the one closest to the problem knows its true heat.

Still, the elders are not entirely misguided. Marriage, like all human arrangements, benefits from perseverance. Yet sometimes the fire burns too hot, the

house cannot be saved, and walking away is an act of courage. But don't be surprised when others, armed with decades of marital survival, think otherwise.

This brings us back to the humble cowpea: *asedua*, *akitiriku*, *adua*. Small, nutritious, and absolutely central to Akan life. But here's the thing: its skin is tough, nearly indigestible. That is why we soak it, peel it, and treat it with patience. And so, another proverb arises: *Akitiriku amoadudu, w'akyiri wo bi a, na yedi wo ni* (Cowpea, it is only when you have something behind you that we respect you). We tolerate its toughness because it holds nourishment and the promise of satisfaction.

Then comes the butter bean (*apateram*); elegant, foreign, and odd. You boil it without salt, and yet it tastes as if salt were present. *Obi nnim nea nkyene nam na eko apateram mu* (No one knows how salt gets into the butter bean). The proverb cuts deeper than it seems. Sometimes, things work without our understanding. Sometimes, mysteries remain. And sometimes, outcomes defy process.

We are tempted, of course, to reduce everything to cause and effect. To believe that if we are kind, others will be kind; if we marry well, we will live happily; if we cook beans without salt, they will taste bland. But life does not always oblige our logic.

That is not a reason to despair. It is a reason to be humble. The elders intervene because they believe in something worth preserving. The one seeking divorce does so not from impulse, but because something within the fire has burned beyond repair. Both parties may be right. And the truth? Well, that often sits somewhere we cannot reach.

In the end, we may say what the old proverb teaches: we cannot know how every bean gets its salt. We cannot always see the workings of the soul, the stresses of a marriage, or the paths of fate. We can only act in wisdom, with mercy, and leave the rest in the hands of God.

Sometimes, mysteries are not to be solved, but to be borne.

105. Coming events cast shadows (aprokuma)

Human beings have always had an uneasy relationship with the future. We yearn to see what lies ahead, but are terrified we might. We read weather patterns, watch the stars, and consult those ancient and perhaps dubious instruments of insight: dreams, prophets, and politicians. Something within us senses that fate seldom arrives unannounced. And so, we look for signs.

The Romans had their omens: ghosts on the streets, blood raining from the heavens, owls hooting in marketplaces. We moderns have gentler signals: the boss starts smiling too much before layoffs, or your spouse begins using full names. For the Akan, the wisdom is clear: *Obi bema wo aduane adi a, na ɔde ampesi di wo adanseɛ* (If someone means to serve you food, they first test you with ampesie). That is to say, great outcomes are preceded by their shadows, however faint.

Yet, because this book insists on walking through the garden gate, we must find our truths among trees and herbs. And here, the grand *aprokuma* lends us both shade and insight.

Now, *aprokuma* (known to scientists as *Panda oleosa* or *Antrocaryon micraster*) is not your average tree. It is a tree of dignity: tall, broad-crowned, and noble in presence, with bark thick enough to clean your hands and flowers delicate enough to woo a duiker. The blossoms appear in March, perfuming the forest with a gentle greenish-white scent. Then, between April and June, come the fruit; rich, plum-like, and so aromatic that elephants, duikers, and other forest dwellers seem to abandon all dignity to chase them.

This gives rise to the proverb: *Aprokuma regu nbwerene mpo na etwe*

akwaduo yi, na ebeso abiribra den? (If the flowering aprokuma already draws yellow-backed ducks, how much more when it begins to fruit?) The truth is plain. When the tree is only flirting with abundance, the forest already stirs with interest. The scent, faint though it may be, carries far, pulling game from unseen corners. To the hunter, this is no time for doubt. It is time to wait because the signs do not lie.

So it is in life. A gentle word today may foretell generosity tomorrow. An unexpected opportunity may signal the beginning of providence. Conversely, a creeping unease, a subtle withdrawal of joy, may warn of heartache on the horizon. But as with all shadows, their meanings are clearest only in hindsight.

Yet we must be cautious. Not all signs are divine telegrams. Some are just noise. And not every *aprokuma* in bloom is worth camping under all night. Still, those attuned to the language of nature and human behaviour learn, over time, that very little happens without warning – if only we knew how to read the script.

A final note on the *aprokuma*: its fruit delights animals and can relieve human stomach aches. The seeds are oily, and the endocarp, when tossed into fire, bursts like a firecracker. Even its wood has a tale, with heartwood a deep reddish brown and sapwood of a lighter hue.

So whether it be an owl in the market, a friend's sudden kindness, or the heady perfume of a flowering tree, remember: the future rarely pounces. It pads through the forest, scattering signs like fallen petals. All we must do is learn to notice.

106. The reversal of privileges (apuro)

In my childhood in Ghana, if someone said that they had not eaten, one was advised to delay sympathy until further clarification. More often than not, what they truly meant was that they had not eaten *fufuo*. Not that they were fasting in any religious sense, but that they had been cruelly served *ampesie* – boiled yam, cocoyam, or plantain in their unadorned, insufficient form. To the Akan palate, this was a meal only in the technical sense. Proper nourishment requires transformation.

Fufuo, sometimes spelt *fufu*, is a staple food. Cassava, yams, or plantains must first be boiled, then pounded with vigour into a smooth, elastic dough; pliable yet resistant. This is done through the rhythmic pounding of a pestle (*wɔma*) in a wooden mortar (*waduro*), both essential instruments in any self-respecting Akan household. It is not too much to say that the kitchen's soul resided in these two items.

Curiously, there are different mortars and pestles for different culinary destinies. One for *fufuo*, another for maize or palm nuts. The *fufuo* pestle is distinguished by a brush-like head, fashioned by battering the end against stone (*taa wɔma*, as they say). The other remains blunt and unassuming. The non-fufuo mortar is even given a separate name, *awaduwa*. And in keeping with the Akan instinct for moral instruction, there is a proverb for this too: *Awaduwa kyinkyin-kyinkyin a, nya abɛ wɔ* (If the little mortar wanders too freely, it ends up with palm nuts to grind). A warning, ostensibly for mortars, but in reality, for

young women overly sociable with men. It is a habit of traditional cultures to hide their ethics in their household objects.

A mortar must never be pounded when empty. It is profane. It is said to simulate the crushing of one's mother's breasts or father's testicles, which is more than sufficient to give any child pause. And one must never wash with water that has lain in a mortar overnight, unless one wishes to see ghosts. I never tried it myself. Nor should a mortar be left uncovered in the open, for it may attract lightning. This was a warning handed down with such solemnity that one suspects a long-forgotten truth behind it.

Both mortar and pestle feature heavily in Akan lore, and their crafting demands discernment. The preferred tree is *apuro* (also called *akumadua*, or *akuamma*), known in botanical circles as *Nesogordonia papaverifera*. It grows tall and straight, generously supplying chewing sticks that leave the breath sweet. As medicine, it is not especially esteemed. The Akan have a saying: *Akuama ye aduro a anka tewe nam nnten wɔ wiram* (If *apuro* were truly medicinal, the duiker, which eats its seeds, would by now be walking upright).

Yet, despite its modest pharmacological credentials, *apuro* is highly sought after for carving pestles and mortars. This, unfortunately, often necessitates felling young trees. One wonders why this tree earned the name *akumadua* (the axe tree). There is a belief that during thunderstorms, a kind of stone axe descends from heaven and buries itself in the earth until it meets water below. It is then said to return, having fulfilled its subterranean pilgrimage. This sacred implement is known as *Onyame akuma* (God's axe). Could it be that *apuro*, for some mysterious chemical or spiritual reason, invites these divine strikes? And is that why mortars made from it must never be left in the rain? Modern science calls such axe-shaped stones *celts*, relics of the Neolithic age. Our ancestors, it seems, mistook archaeology for revelation.

Pounding *fufuo* was rarely a joyful act. I can't recall ever seeing anyone perform it with enthusiasm, let alone delight. As a child, I developed a thousand excuses to avoid it. On occasion, I would flee, only to return and find the cassava and plantain half-pounded; no longer fit for boiling, yet far from *fufuo*. I had no choice but to continue pounding. *Fufuo* was then the daily fare; rice, the luxury reserved for guests and holidays.

Times have shifted in a way that would almost amuse, if it didn't feel so unfair. Today, rice has triumphed, and *fufuo* has become the occasional treat. The pestle now lies idle, and those of us once conscripted into pounding are told, with smiling faces, that the children must be spared. They say the little ones need

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the meat for strength, though I distinctly remember being told we would receive more when we were grown. The age of *fufuo* has passed, and with it, the promises made to those who served it.

107. Everyone loves justice...for others (kokora)

Jürgen Klopp, former manager of Liverpool, once recounted a story in an interview with German television. In his younger days at Mainz, he witnessed Oliver Kahn, then Germany's number one goalkeeper, dismiss an autograph-seeking fan with a curt "Not now." Klopp, not yet a star himself, thought Kahn arrogant. But years later, after becoming a celebrity in his own right, he admitted he understood completely. What once appeared as rudeness was in fact self-preservation. He had, at last, stood where Kahn had stood.

It is always easier to pass judgement from the comfort of another man's shoes. One sees such things everywhere. The traveller who scoffs at another for taking the more expensive VIP bus from Kumasi to Accra may himself, when fortune smiles and his party is in power, fly first class from Accra to Kumasi without a second thought. *Principles*, one might say, often hitch a ride on poverty. Once prosperity calls, those same principles are left by the roadside.

The Italians, with their flair for insight, have a proverb for this: *Tutti amano la giustizia negli affari degli altri* (Everyone loves justice in the affairs of others). The Akans put it with rather more texture: *Tɔprɛ twene, yɛnka nni w'akyi a, wose agorɔ yi yɛ dɛ* (If you are not the one being tortured, the *tɔprɛ* drum sounds like music).

The proverb's origin lies in a practice most of us would now struggle to imagine, though our ancestors accepted it as necessary justice. In earlier times, murder and certain grave crimes were met with death: slow, deliberate, and public. The condemned man's ordeal began before dawn. A forked iron was thrust through

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his cheeks to silence any curses he might fling at the king. Then came the procession. The man, bound and bloodied, was paraded through the streets as the *tɔprɛ* drum beat out its rhythm.

This was no perfunctory execution. It was a theatre. The cartilage of his nose was pierced, and through it was threaded the spiny stem of the *kokora* plant, *Dioscorea minutiflora*, a fruit-bearing yam with a stem nature never meant for nose-rings. The name *kokora*, long since separated from its botanical roots, now connotes the essence of torment.

The display continued. Knives, four in number, were pushed into the body at precise angles, designed to cause agony without damaging anything vital. The man would then be dragged further, the crowd drumming and singing. It is said some met their future spouses at executions. Thus, for the onlookers, convinced that the culprit deserved the punishment, the dancing and drumming were a source of fun. Rattray's *Religion and Art in Ashanti* provides a vivid account.

The cruelty was not hidden; it was part of the spectacle. Ears were sliced off. Arms hacked at the elbows. Legs below the knees. The condemned was expected to dance. If he refused, executioners would peel skin from his back and wave it before him like a flag. If he survived the twelve hours, his throat would finally be cut. Thus ended the ritual.

From such executions arose another saying: *Atwamene biara suro ayeya-nna* (The throat-cutter fears to lie on his back). One who has delivered pain instinctively fears vulnerability. Here we meet a truth far older than modern psychology: projection. We suppose others think and feel as we do, because we cannot imagine them otherwise. The executioner believes someone will slit *his* throat. The first-class traveller believes everyone would do the same if they could. The once-hungry celebrity comes to understand why the famous man once said *no*.

In each case, the moral eye looks outward with ease and inward with reluctance. The *tɔprɛ* drum sounds like joy, until one hears it played for oneself or a close relative.

108. Feigned assistance (nnye me nnyene me)

In 1992, a certain musical bombshell struck the Ghanaian airwaves: *Playboy*, an album by the ever-insightful Daddy Lumba. Among its many tracks was a song that stood out for its rhythm and insight into human pretence. In it, a man attempts to lure a married woman, promising a life of bliss, comfort, and adoration. But the woman, evidently not born yesterday, counters his advances with a question worthy of Socrates in a highlife bar: “If you are the man of good character you claim to be, why are you still unmarried?”

And then comes the line: *Emegye me na nnyene me* (Do not take me only to destroy me). It is a proverb, a warning, and, most intriguingly, a plant. The *nnye me na nnyene me* is known in English as milk bush and botanically as *Thevetia peruviana* or *Cascabela thevetia*. It grows untidily, with narrow leaves and bright yellow, trumpet-like flowers. You will often find it as a hedge in school compounds, where its petals offer nectar for any child patient enough to suck it. The seeds, shaped like little tokens, were strung into necklaces or chewed as purgatives by the brave (or the desperate).

The plant appears generous. Its leafy sprawl seems to offer shade and refuge from the sun. But, like certain types of friendship, it conceals a more selfish nature. Beneath its shadow, few other plants can grow. The shade, rather than a sanctuary, is a ceiling. What appeared to be a shelter is in fact a sentence. One begins with hope and ends with stunted growth. Thus, the name: *do not rescue me, only to ruin me*.

How like some human relationships this is; those who offer help for their

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glory. Their support becomes your dependence. Their favour stifles. It brings to mind the saying in Russian: *He drowned while they were helping him out of the water.*

And curiously, this same deceptive plant was enlisted in yet another form of repair. In the 1990s, the audio cassette was king. These relics of the analogue age were notoriously fragile. Sometimes the tape would spew from the cartridge like entrails, tangled and useless. To repair it, one needed an adhesive, something strong but temporary. Enter the milk bush.

When you snapped a young node of the plant, it oozed a white sap: sticky when dry, perfect for mending magnetic tape. It served another purpose, too: body art. As children, we would write our names on our skin with the sap and press sand onto it. When the sap dried, the sand held fast for days, forming a primitive tattoo. It was all innocent fun.



Nnye me na nnyene - Thevetia peruviana

But let us return to Lumba and his song. Rumour has it that *Playboy* was not a fiction but a thinly disguised lament. The villain, we're told, was a rich man who married Theresa (previously linked to Lumba). If this is true, then what we

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have is no ordinary highlife hit but an *akutia* song, a lyrical jab wrapped in melody.

One wonders if Lumba ever forgave the man before he departed this life. Perhaps he did, perhaps he didn't. But the proverb still speaks: *Nnye me na nnyene me* (Do not shelter me only to suffocate me). Whether in love, friendship, or flora, the false protector is often more dangerous than the open enemy.

109. Discomfort in the service of truth (nunum)

The Akan, like many traditional peoples, place great stock in taboos. They serve as social prohibitions and moral boundaries drawn for the sake of harmony. Few taboos are more strictly guarded than that against *mogyadie* (incest). But this is no narrow concern with legal kinship. Among the Akan, incest refers more broadly to intimacy between those of the same *abusua*, or maternal clan. Thus, two people who have never met, separated by geography or generation, are forbidden to marry if they share the same maternal root. Kinship, here, is not a matter of surnames or sentiment; it is something deeper, older, ancestral.

And yet, with all the weight such taboos carry, the Akans are not beyond pressing even this boundary in defence of something they hold dearer still: truth. A proverb puts it in terms that are striking to the modern ear: *Se nokore hye wo ni twe mu na wode wo kɛte kɔyi a, wonnii no* (If the truth lies in your mother's vagina, and you must use your penis to retrieve it, you have not had sex with her).

Let's pause here. The image is jarring, perhaps even repellent. But the moral it conveys is deep. Truth is worth enduring shame, suspicion, or the most grotesque appearance of wrongdoing. If truth hides in a place deemed utterly forbidden, you are still bound to seek it. Morality, in this light, is about courageous integrity.

Of course, not all wisdom comes with such bluntness. Another Akan proverb puts the point more subtly: *Se wo pusu nunum a na wote ne kankan* (If you shake the *nunum* plant, then you will smell its scent).

Nunum, known in English as African basil (*Ocimum gratissimum*), does not

announce itself immediately. You must disturb it (shake it, bruise it) before it releases its pungent aroma. Its strength is hidden until provoked. So it is with truth, or character, or even talent. We often discover what lies within a person only under pressure. And sometimes, pressure is the necessary touch that awakens what has lain dormant.

There is yet more to this unassuming plant. *Nunum* grows with stubborn generosity – by roadsides, in gardens, in the margins of fields. Gravity, beasts, and humans alike easily disperse its seeds. It is always close by, always useful. It features widely in traditional medicine: for fever, for dysentery, for snakebite. The leaves are boiled and drunk. Or ground and inserted rectally, a method perhaps less elegant, but more effective in urgent cases. A child sick with fever may be treated this way, and if the one applying the remedy is his mother, he may cry, but no one could accuse her of harm.

Here lies another truth: the appearance of violence does not equal malevolence. A second proverb brings this out beautifully: *Nunum ho annwo no a, na efri ɔmanni* (If the *nunum* does not know peace, it is because of the troubles of the owner's relatives).

The plant's medicinal value makes it a target. Family members will come and go, plucking it freely, trampling the compound in search of help. The one who grows the plant sacrifices privacy and peace for the good of others. So it is with any useful person. To be valuable is often to be burdened by friends and relations.

We might draw a final lesson from the *nunum* plant. It does not flourish in manicured gardens alone. It grows where the earth has been disturbed, where others see waste. It thrives in adversity, offering medicine, scent, and truth – if you are brave enough to shake it.

And if the truth lies in a place that offends, still it must be found. As the ancients knew, and as we too often forget, it is better to endure discomfort in the service of truth than to enjoy comfort in the shadow of a lie.

110. None shows God to a child (Nyamedua)

Like most civilisations that have looked with honest eyes upon the world, the Akans have never doubted that there is a Creator, one who stands above all things. His names are many: *Onyankopon*, *Nyame*, *Odomankoma*. But His being is singular. In our stories, He once walked among us – close, visible, domestic. But as is often the case with divine nearness, human folly could not leave well enough alone.

There is a tale. It is said that Nyame once dwelt upon the earth until one day, an old woman, pounding palm nuts for her children, struck Him repeatedly with her pestle. Not deliberately, one assumes, but in the absent-minded business of feeding a family. Still, even the most patient deity may grow weary of bruises. So, Nyame withdrew upward, into the sky.

Yet even from His heavenly seat, He didn't sever the cord. He remains ever present, ever active. He sent four of His children, all associated with water, to dwell among us: the wise and ancient River Tano, eldest of the lot; Lake Bosomtwe, a place of mystery; River Bea; and *apo*, the vast Atlantic. He also shares authority with Asaase Yaa, the Earth Goddess, whose name is spoken second only to His when libation is poured. Like Gaia among the Greeks, she is life-giving and life-receiving. And, as in many wise traditions, it is forbidden to defile her: one must not commit acts such as sexual intercourse in the bush, for that desecrates her sacred presence.

To speak of indigenous religion is, for many, to conjure images of *akɔmfɔ* (priests), shrines, or the minor spirits known as *abosom*. But these are merely

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attendants in the great court. They are not the King. The Akan have always known One Supreme Being. And this is no parochial idea. Whether you are Ewe, Ga, Dagomba, or Frafra, the language changes, but the logic remains: the name for God is singular. He is *Mawu*, *Nyonmo*, *Nawuni*, *Naayine*. Never plural.

Ethnic Group	Principal name of God
Ada	Mau
Busanga	Hunsu Beremagua
Dagomba	Nawuni
Ewe	Mawu
Frafra	Naayine
Ga	Nyonmo
Gonja	Eboore
Guan	Onyam
Katsina	We
Kusase	Naawu
Mapmprusi	Nawuni
Nkonya	Blue
Talensi	Nayiwun
Waala	Na

This unity of belief is reflected in a simple yet luminous proverb: *Obi nkyere abɔfra Nyame* (No one needs to show a child God).

This is metaphysics. The child, say the Akans, has come from another place, has passed through the veil, and has not entirely forgotten. The soul remembers what the lips cannot say. In the child's openness, his laughter, even his fear, there lies an instinct for the divine that no catechism can improve upon. A child knows God the way he knows hunger or sunlight.

This innate awareness once found tangible expression in nearly every Akan home, long before the cross and the chalice arrived. In each compound stood a simple altar: a forked branch from the *Nyamedua* tree (literally, "God's tree"). A pot would be placed there, filled with water and herbs for cleansing and blessing. Though Nyame had risen to the sky, His tree remained in our courtyards.

The *Nyamedua* (*Alstonia congensis*) is a tree of strength. It has smooth, grey bark and throws out its branches in sets of four, like arms in perpetual prayer. It exudes a white latex, which was once used to adulterate rubber, though that was not its highest purpose. Its roots were known to cleanse the body through enemas. Its wood, soft and pale, was the chosen material for stools, bowls, and spoons. The very tools of daily life were carved from it. Indeed, many famed Akan stools, the seats of power and legacy, were shaped from *Nyamedua* or its

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close cousin, *furuntum* (*Funtumia africana*). The other name for the tree (*senuro*) derives from *sen*, to carve or shape. Even its name invites formation, purpose, and beauty.

Its bark, boiled in water, produces a tonic to treat malaria. Yet its greatest medicine was spiritual: a reminder that, though God had withdrawn into mystery, He had not abandoned us. His symbol stood, quite literally, rooted in the earth of our homes.

It is easy, in the modern world, to think of such traditions as odd or obsolete. But they are neither. The *Nyamedua* stands for something we are always in danger of forgetting: that God is not an argument to be proven, but a Presence to be remembered. And that no one, not even the wisest among us, needs to show a child where to find Him.

Zoological Wisdom from West Africa

As we've seen, in Ghana, proverbs are the seasoning of daily conversation; those short, sharp turns of phrase that clarify, challenge, and sometimes comfort. Among the Akans, such wisdom is also drawn from the animal world. Animals, like sacred trees, are symbols: tutors, messengers, and, at times, mirrors held up to human nature.

A sequel to this book, *Zoological Wisdom from West Africa*, turns its gaze to the beasts of the forest and savannah. In these pages, you will find the elephant's dignity, the hare's cunning, the ant's diligence, and the vulture's patience, all preserved in the proverbs of the Akan people. These are not idle comparisons. The animals are not used frivolously but reverently, as figures through which truth reveals itself in forms both familiar and strange.

You may also encounter creatures that have all but vanished from Ghana's landscapes, animals now rare or extinct. Yet their footprints remain in language. Proverbs have kept them alive as reminders. Through them, we are called to remember not only what we have lost, but also what we still have.

To study these sayings is to sit at the feet of generations who watched the wild with reverence and imagination. The wisdom they gathered was not written in books but spoken, sung, and remembered. And like all true wisdom, it has not grown old.

Let us then listen carefully. For the forest speaks, and the animals have not yet fallen silent.

Glossary of Twi words

Abetee Also called *konkonte*, a dish made from cassava flour and eaten with soups.

Abeduro The whole bunch of palm fruits, also known as *bemu*.

Abedwoa The palm kernel with the shell on.

Abefua A single palm nut with its pericarp.

Abenkwan Palm-nut soup, prepared with the pulpy and oily substance of palm nuts. The greasy soup is often eaten with *fufuo*, *banku* or *konkonte*.

Abetene Old palm trees; are usually tall, and their fruits are difficult to harvest.

Abetwa The process of extracting sap from palm trees to produce a type of alcoholic beverage called palm wine.

Abina The bark of trees used as a fence, roof or sleeping mat.

Abinkyi Spoiled cocoa beans, usually dark and separated from the quality cocoa beans.

Aborokyiri Europe (means beyond the horizon).

Adonko A rope swing, made by tying one end of a long rope to a tree branch and tying a plank at the other end. The swinger then sits astride on the plank and firmly holds the rope. Someone pulls the swing and lets go of it.

Adukuro

- a. Buttress of a tree, where farm produce can be stored to keep it safe from pests.
- b. A hole in a tree that collects rainwater.

Adwaa A trap where hunters encircle their plots with a fence, leaving a select few entrances, cleverly rigged with traps and any unsuspecting creature that ventured into the farm through these designated pathways, unwittingly sealed its fate.

Adwe betee “Cooldown” is a magic word said to calm down a person or a thing. In tales, failure to say it leads to destructive consequences.

Akəkuno Palm weaver grub; a considered a delicacy by some.

Akankyee Plantain-leaf-wrapped pounded plantain and cooked.

Akaw Cooked cocoyam with the skin on, only removed while eating.

Aketekyiwa A receptacle into which palm wine flows from the fallen palm tree.

Akpeteshie Locally distilled gin, usually from palm wine or sugar cane. Very strong yet cheap.

Akrakuro Deep-fried mashed plantain ball.

Akutia Innuendo. It could be a name given to a pet, depicting the sour relationship between the owner and the neighbours.

Akyenkyen The kernels in the unripe nuts are edible.

Ampesie A traditional dish that consists of sliced and boiled yam, plantains, cassava, or cocoyam, served with a variety of stews or sauces.

Apantu Plantain with large fingers, best for *fufuo*. Compare with *apem*.

Apata A shed, usually for storing harvested yam or drying cocoa beans.

Apem Plantain with many small fingers, best for *ampesie*. Compare with *apantu*

Apesse-Burow Maize planted in the lean season

Asmorɔdwe Palm weevil, which can be roasted and eaten. Kids play with them by tying a string on the legs and holding on to the string as they try to fly away.

Asaase Yaa Earth goddess

Glossary of Twi words

- Asamado* Abode of the dead
- Asɔsoa* A picker, known as go-to-hell, with a curved blade used for harvesting cocoa.
- Aserɛnɛ* Carpet on which cocoa beans are dried.
- Atɔdwe* Planting of cocoa with the raw beans.
- Atekubu* A marble nut whose inner contents have been removed and replaced with another material to make it heavier.
- Atɛntenben* A traditional flute made from a young bamboo tree
- Ayɛfare* A compensation an adulterer pays to the husband of the woman with whom he has had illicit sexual intercourse.
- Baba* Dried plantain leaves which can serve as toilet paper.
- Banku* Meal prepared from maize
- Betema* The cluster in the bunch of palm nuts.
- Borɔde-tire* The peduncle (the stalk bearing the fruit), when beaten into a sponge and mixed with charcoal, is used to clean the teeth.
- Borɔdewa* Suckers of plantain for replantation
- Brɔdedwo* Roasted plantain
- Bragorɔ* Puberty rite ushering young girls into adulthood.
- Dɔɔ* Potash, often obtained from the ashes of cocoa husks and used to prepare local soaps.
- Dɔnkɔ* A slave
- Dwetire* Capital
- Ɛtɔ* Mashed yam, plantain to cocoyam, usually mixed with palm oil.
- Fufuo or fufu* A traditional dish made from starchy ingredients like cassava, plantains, or yams. These ingredients are boiled, then pounded and kneaded to create a smooth, elastic, and dough-like consistency. Served with soup.
- Hyire* White clay
- Kabyire* Headrest, used for carrying loads on the head. They are typically made from locally sourced materials and are crafted to provide comfort and support to individuals who need to transport heavy items on their heads.
- Kɔɔtrekɔɔ* The young edible ‘root’ that usually has the appearance of something I don’t want to mention.
- Kɔɔtkorɔ* Hooked stick for weeding.
- Kelewele* Spicy fried plantain
- Kenkey* A traditional dish made primarily from fermented maize dough
- Kenten* Basket
- Konkonte* Also called abetee, a dish made from cassava flour, usually eaten with soups.
- Kookoobere* The major cocoa season when cocoa farmers have a lot of money to spend.
- Krɔben* A reddish substance obtained from the dried roots of ɔdwen that are ground up and mixed with water. It was used to paint furniture.
- Kuli-Kuli* A snack made from the residue of groundnuts after the extraction of oil. It is common in Zongo communities in Ghana.
- Merekensono* Young and tender palm branches used to denote peace or as a warning. In the olden days, envoys were sent to the enemy with it around their necks to settle peace terms. In the case of epidemics, it was sometimes hung in front of houses where there was sickness to warn people from going inside.
- Mfɛfena* A fungal infection of the toes often affecting those who go barefoot in muddy and stagnant water.
- Mmɛfe* After extracting the edible parts from the pericarp, the chaff is left to dry. You can burn the dried pericarp chaff and cover it with an empty drinking water pot. This produces a smoky ‘flavour’ in the water that is later poured into the pot. It gives the water a good taste.

Glossary of Twi words

Mmotia Mframa Whirlwind. Believed to be controlled by dwarves, *mmotia*. *Mmotia* are said to be some sort of human-like creatures who dwell in caves deep in the forest with their toes pointing backwards and heels forward; kidnappers of children between the ages of four and six (sometimes through the whirlwind), whom they feed with mashed plantain mixed with oil. A child who refuses to eat the meal is returned and placed at a conspicuous spot, hands and legs bound with some creeping plant. A child who eats the meal is returned, furnished with charms and amulets that are later found potent in curing many illnesses. *Mmotia*'s means of communication is said to be by whistling. Their favourite food is said to be bananas.

Mogyadie Incest. A taboo.

Mpotɔmpotɔ Plantain pudding. Kwahu people instead call cocoyam pudding as such.

Mmukyea A three-stone fire or three-stone cooking stove cooking method used in rural areas, which involves arranging three stones in a triangular shape to support a cooking pot over an open fire.

Nkapoowa Young and freshly sprouted mushrooms, known as mushroom *pins* or *pinheads*. Small, compact mushroom caps and thin, delicate stems characterise these first stages. As the mushrooms continue to develop, their caps expand, and their stems thicken.

Nkatenkwan Palm-nut soup, eaten with fufuo, banku or konkonte.

Nkudaa Old, incurable sores

Nkukuagya The large, unsliced wood logs that are connected and set alight for heating and cooking purposes.

Nkurasefoɔ A derogatory term for those living in the village and generally for those showing uncouth behaviour.

Nkyewee Corn nuts made from roasted dried corn. It goes well with pawpaw when ground into powder form.

Nsaduwaase Palm wine shed where the tapper brings all the harvested palm wine for distillation, and people sit there to drink palm wine.

Nsafufuo Palm wine obtained from uprooted palm trees.

Nsawaa Cash donations given to the relatives of a deceased person.

Nsowaa A basket fish trap: a traditional fishing tool used to catch fish and other aquatic organisms. It is typically made from natural materials such as woven reeds, bamboo, or other flexible and durable materials. The conical-shaped basket is designed to take advantage of the behaviour of fish, guiding them into the trap through a one-way entry system, making it difficult for them to escape once inside.

Nton An Akan matrilineal clan, a group of people believed to descend from the same (mythical) ancestor and thus share the same blood. It is also known as abusua; it includes Oyoko, Aduana, Agona, Asona, Ekoona, Bretuo, Asennee and Asakyiri. Members from the same matriclan may not marry.

Ntorɔ Akan patri-spirit of a person transmitted through the father, divided into groups such as Bosompɔra (River Pra), Bosomtwe (Lake Bosomtwe), Bosommuru (a river in Adanse), Bosomnkɔtia (the Sea), Bosomayensu (River Ayensu), Bosomafram (River Afram) and Bosomkrete (a shrine at Aburi).

Ntumkum Palm-wine obtained from the second to the third day after tapping of the palm. Not quite strong at this stage, and women may prefer this version.

Ntwoma Red ochre used for painting mud houses and faces during ceremonies.

Nubuu Cocoyam pudding. Kwahus call plantain pudding such.

Nwera White calico or linen worn on special occasions

Pato The three-walled room, also called BAMMA, in which elders sit to deliberate on matters, children sit to listen to tales or corpses are laid in state for public viewing.

Petraa Tomato farming that is cultivated in the dry season, which requires regular watering.

Glossary of Twi words

Putuo Yam barn to preserve harvested yam, built on open ground, but is usually, at least partially, shaded.

Sasa Haunting ghosts from humans and some big animals. A hunter may have to undergo a cleansing rite to cast away the spirit lest they go mad.

Sawie The roots of a certain plant beaten and used as a sponge to clean the teeth.

Trotro Privately owned minibus used for public transport within cities. They travel on fixed routes.

Derived from *tro*, threepence, the original minimum fare on such buses.

Tu-sapɔ Wads to which gunpowder (ATUDURO) is added to fire.

Wɔma Pestle. Used for pounding fufuo, palm nut, maize and others in a mortar.

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Appendix A – List of plants

<i>Twi</i>	<i>Botanical</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Ga</i>	<i>Ewe</i>	<i>Medicinal uses</i>
<i>Abeneduro</i>	<i>Alternanthera pungens</i>	Khaki joy weeds	<i>Dmei</i>	<i>Mitsimitsi</i>	A decoction is used internally to treat gonorrhoea [1]; the leaves are wilted by heat and squeezed, and the juice from them is used to cure neuralgia (nerve pain) and the leaves are combined with palm oil and employed by postpartum women to enhance milk production [2].
<i>Aberewa Kata Wo Twe</i>	<i>Mimosa pudica</i>	Sensitive plant	<i>Ofanyo mba</i>	<i>Avadzɔ</i>	The leaves are used as medicine for guinea worms [2].
<i>Abe</i>	<i>Elaeis guineensis</i>	Oil palm tree	<i>Nme</i>	<i>Deti</i>	A person bitten by a snake can drink palm oil to induce vomiting.
<i>Abia</i>	<i>Merremia alata</i>	White button wood			A bark infusion is used as a tonic for dysentery, aphthae, fever, and scurvy [3].
<i>Abiribiriwa</i>	<i>Lannea acida</i>				It is combined with other plants to treat sterility [4].
<i>Abisaa/ Afetewa</i>	<i>Vitex doniana</i>	Black plum	<i>Son</i>	<i>Foyiti</i>	Liquor from the boiled bark is taken to treat mouth sores, and the bark is used for stomach complaints [2]
<i>Aborɔbe</i>	<i>Ananas comosus</i>	Pineapple	<i>Blɔfonme</i>	<i>Ablendi or Atɔtɔ</i>	The fruits are cut up, boiled, and taken to improve digestion and increase appetite [5, 2]. The leaves encourage the onset of menstrual periods and ease painful ones [5].
<i>Abrɔdwobaa / Ntɔmmɔ</i>	<i>Ipomoea batatas</i>	Sweet potato	<i>Atomo</i>	<i>Dzete</i>	The leaves are used to treat measles [6] and are ground with salt and applied to whitlow, which bursts in two to three days [2].
<i>Abonkuruma</i>	<i>Ricinus communis</i>	Castor oil plant	<i>Adene nkuruma</i>	<i>Lɔngɔ</i>	The leaves are used to cure Guinea worm by heating it and applying the softened leaf to the sore, which coaxes the worm out [2]
<i>Aburobia</i>	<i>Canna indica</i>	Indian shot	<i>Ahabia</i>	<i>Toviaku</i>	The flowers are used to cure eye disease, while the leaves are mashed in water and put in baths to cure fever [2].

<i>Twi</i>	<i>Botanical</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Ga</i>	<i>Ewe</i>	<i>Medicinal uses</i>
<i>Aburow</i>	<i>Zea mays</i>	Maize	<i>Able</i>	<i>Bli</i>	A decoction of the cob is used to treat nose bleeds [3] and cornsilk (stamens) can be used fresh or dried as a remedy for urinary disorders [5].
<i>Acheampong</i>	<i>Chromolaena odorata</i>	Siam weed			An infusion of leaves is taken to cleanse the blood [3, 6].
<i>Adobe</i>	<i>Raphia hookeri</i>	Raffia palm	<i>Hlowetee</i>	<i>Adzoka</i>	The oily mesocarp of the fruit is used as a liniment [1, 3]
<i>Adwera</i>	<i>Portulaca oleracea</i>	Purslane	<i>Awɔke</i>	<i>Afla</i>	The leaves are eaten with tiger nuts for skin diseases [2] and the plant can be used as an antidote for snake bite [5].
<i>Afirifiriwa/Nkyene Ne Ngo</i>	<i>Cleistopholis patens</i>	Salt and oil tree			A leaf infusion is used to treat fevers [4, 3].
<i>Ahoma-Kyem</i>	<i>Spiropetalum heterophyllum</i>				The roots are used to help children walk.
<i>Ahyehyewonsa</i>	<i>Urera mannii</i>				The leaves are eaten to promote free bowel movement [2]
<i>Akasaa</i>	<i>Chrysophyllum africanum</i>	African star apple	<i>Alasa</i>	<i>Adansawa</i>	An infusion of the stem bark is taken to promote breast milk, and the powdered bark is applied to sores [1, 3].
<i>Akata</i>	<i>Bombax buonopozense</i>	Red-flowered silk cotton tree	<i>Akrɔn-krɔn</i>	<i>Agudese</i>	A warm bath of the decoction is given to feverish patients, especially children [4] and the leaves are used to treat venereal diseases and constipation [7].
<i>Akatoa</i>	<i>Cucumeropsis mannii</i>	Egusi			The fruit juice, mixed with other ingredients, is applied to the navel of newborns until the cord stump drops off [4].
<i>Akekadiuro</i>	<i>Zingiber officinale</i>	Ginger	<i>Kakaotsofa</i>	<i>Nkrawusa</i>	Roots are used to treat rheumatism [2] and are particularly helpful for relieving nausea and indigestion [5].
<i>Akutu/Ankaa</i>	<i>Citrus aurantium</i>	Orange	<i>Akutu</i>	<i>Atɔtɔnuti</i>	The juice helps the body remove waste products and, rich in vitamin C, helps the immune system ward off infection [5].
<i>Amire</i>	<i>Terminalia ivorensis</i>	Shingle wood	<i>Emeri</i>	<i>Dzogbedodo</i>	A bark decoction is used to treat wounds [4]
<i>Anafranaku</i>	<i>Hillieria latifolia</i>			<i>Abegboma</i>	The leaves are boiled in water, and those who have jaundice sit in steam [2].
<i>Ananse Adodowa</i>	<i>Cola caricifolia</i>	Monkey cola	<i>Asonkobia</i>	<i>Akpayiro</i>	The leaves are used as laxatives. [4]
<i>Ananse Nkatee</i>	<i>Desmodium adscendens</i>				Liquor from the boiled leaves is taken for constipation [2].

<i>Twɪ</i>	<i>Botanical</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Ga</i>	<i>Ewe</i>	<i>Medicinal uses</i>
<i>Anansetrumuhoma</i>	<i>Sabicea calycina</i>				The ground leaves are put on young children's joints to help them walk [2].
<i>Anwonomo</i>	<i>Marantochloa cuspidate</i>				The leaves are used as food wrappers.
<i>Anyankomaba/Kwesi Popuro</i>	<i>Myrianthus arboreus</i>	Giant yellow mulberry		<i>Avagolo</i>	The bark is used to treat chest complaints [4].
<i>Apakyie</i>	<i>Lagenaria siceraria</i>	Large calabash	<i>Apakyi</i>		The fruit rind is used in a decoction to treat problems of the uterus or womb [6, 3].
<i>Apateram</i>	<i>Phaseolus lunatus</i>	Butter bean	<i>Akpatramɔ</i>		It is estrogenic and helps reduce menopausal symptoms [5].
<i>Apɔse</i>	<i>Cnestis ferruginea</i>				A root decoction is drunk as an anaphrodisiac [7].
<i>Apea</i>	<i>Mucuna pruriens</i>	Cow itch	<i>Anlenle</i>	<i>Adza</i>	The hairs on the fruit are used as an enema for worms in children [8, 7].
<i>Aprɛ</i>	<i>Annona muricata</i>	Sour sop	<i>Aluguntugui</i>	<i>Votsi</i>	The fruits are pressed, and the juice is diluted with water to give a refreshing drink [2].
<i>Aprɛ</i>	<i>Annona squamosa</i>	Sweet sop	<i>Nanwie</i>	<i>Yevunnikile</i>	The leaves can be used as an insecticide and to prevent bedbugs [7]. The young shoots are used to relieve colds and chills [5].
<i>Aprokuma</i>	<i>Panda oleosa</i>	Panda			The seed oil is applied to ulcers [1, 3].
<i>Apuro/Akumadua</i>	<i>Nesogordonia papaverifera</i>				The leaves are used in the treatment of oral problems [4].
<i>Asedua</i>	<i>Vigna unguiculata</i>	Cowpea	<i>Yɔɔ</i>	<i>Kelege</i>	The crushed leaves are used to bond and heal broken bones [6].
<i>Asiapiiriwa/Ɛfan</i>	<i>Justicia ladanoides</i>	Justicia			The leaves are used to treat wounds [1, 3].
<i>Asratoa</i>	<i>Oncoba spinosa</i>	Snuff-box tree	<i>Asratɔ</i>	<i>Asragui</i>	The liquor from the boiled leaves is drunk to cure clap [2].
<i>Atadwe</i>	<i>Cyperus esculentus</i>	Tiger nut	<i>Ataɲme</i>	<i>Fie</i>	The juice from the tubers is aphrodisiac [2].
<i>Atawa</i>	<i>Pentaclethra macrophylla</i>	Oil bean tree		<i>Tsaklo</i>	The boiled bark is used as a lotion for sores [2].
<i>Ate</i>	<i>Dioclea reflexa</i>	Marble plant		<i>Agbodzi</i>	The root is taken to treat diarrhoea [9].
<i>Atoa</i>	<i>Spondias mombin</i>	Hog plum	<i>Aadɔn</i>	<i>Akukɔti</i>	The fruit is mildly laxative [6].
<i>Awapupuo</i>	<i>Cola cordifolia</i>		<i>Ofran</i>	<i>(U)wu</i>	The seeds are chewed for their stimulating properties [2].
<i>Awonyon</i>	<i>Vernonia amygdalina</i>	Bitter leaf		<i>Gbo</i>	The stems are chewed to restore loss of appetite [2].
<i>Aya</i>	<i>Matteuccia</i>	Fern			The leaves are used to prepare soup for new mothers.
<i>Babadua</i>	<i>Thalia geniculate</i>	Arrowroot			The stems were used as diving rods to find who had committed murder [2].

<i>Twi</i>	<i>Botanical</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Ga</i>	<i>Ewe</i>	<i>Medicinal uses</i>
<i>Bankye</i>	<i>Manihot esculenta</i>	Cassava	<i>bɔi</i>	<i>Agbeli</i>	The leaves are haemostatic (stop blood flow) [6].
<i>Bayere</i>	<i>Dioscorea spp.</i>	Yam	<i>Bayere</i>	<i>Ɛte</i>	Induces urine [9]
<i>Bobɔmfradaa</i>	<i>Telfairia occidentalis</i>	Fluted pumpkin			Pregnant women use the leaf juice as a tonic [1, 3].
<i>Bentoa</i>	<i>Lagenaria vulgaris</i>	Seringe	<i>Bentoa</i>		The ground leaves are used as an enema [2].
<i>Bese-Kyem</i>	<i>Cola nitida</i>	Red cola	<i>Teese</i>	<i>Bisi</i>	Cola nuts stimulate the nervous system when chewed and are also considered to be antidepressants [5].
<i>Besepa</i>	<i>Cola acuminata</i>	White cola	<i>Tsere</i>	<i>Bisi</i>	Cola nuts stimulate the nervous system when chewed and are also considered to be antidepressants [5]
<i>Bese-Torɔ</i>	<i>Cola verticillate</i>	Slippery cola			Like real cola, also chewed to stimulate the nervous system, although it's bitter [7].
<i>Besimankuma</i>	<i>Cussonia arborea</i>			<i>Awlua</i>	Based on the <i>Doctrine of Signatures</i> , it is often used to treat leprosy [4].
<i>Bedi-Wo-Nua</i>	<i>Canarium schweinfurthii</i>	Incense tree			The gum is put on stoves to keep away mosquitoes and gives off a scent like lavender [2]. The plant is used to treat coughs, and its exudate for venereal diseases [9].
<i>Bonhon</i>	<i>Laportea aestuans</i>	West Indian wood nettle			The boiled leaves are used to cure constipation [2].
<i>Borɔdee</i>	<i>Musa × paradisiaca</i>	Plantain	<i>Amadaa</i>	<i>Abladzo</i>	The root, mashed in water, is used as an enema for diarrhoea [2].
<i>Borɔfere</i>	<i>Carica papaya</i>	Pawpaw or papaya	<i>Akpakpa or Gɔ</i>	<i>Adiba</i>	The latex from the trunk is applied to speed the healing of wounds, ulcers, boils, warts, and cancerous tumours. The seeds are used as a gentle purgative for worms [5, 2].
<i>Obrane-Atwe-Ata</i>	<i>Sida acuta</i>	Common wireweed	<i>Ewuɔblo</i>	<i>Afidemii</i>	The leaves are mashed in water and the liquid is used as an enema for paralysed children to help them walk [2].
<i>Ɔdan/Ɔdannan</i>	<i>Piptadeniastrum africanum</i>	African greenheart			Roots and bark are used as an enema [2].
<i>Ɔdom</i>	<i>Erythrophleum suaveolens</i>	Ordeal tree or Sassafras tree		<i>Atsa</i>	The bark is used as an emetic and purgative [3, 1].
<i>Ɔdwen</i>	<i>Baphia nitida</i>	Camwood	<i>Aboloobaatso</i>	<i>Odzori</i>	A bark decoction is drunk to cure epilepsy and cardiac pain [1].
<i>Ɔdwendwere</i>	<i>Lecaniodiscus cupanioides</i>				Fresh bark is used to treat earache [4].
<i>Ɔhwiremo</i>	<i>Combretum racemosum</i>				The young leaves are used to destroy worms [7].

<i>Twi</i>	<i>Botanical</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Ga</i>	<i>Ewe</i>	<i>Medicinal uses</i>
<i>Okanto</i>	<i>Zanthoxylum zanthoxyloides</i>	Candle wood	<i>Haateo</i>	<i>Xetsi</i>	The bark is boiled in water, and the infusion is put in the mouth to cure toothache [2].
<i>Okatanini Agyaben</i>	<i>Leea guineensis</i>				The roots, boiled with pepper, is drunk to cure gonorrhoea [7].
<i>Okoro</i>	<i>Albizia zygia</i>		<i>Kulo</i>	<i>Kulo</i>	Ground bark is applied to the sores caused by yaws [2].
<i>Okototaka</i>	<i>Desmodium velutinum</i>	Velvetleaf desmodium		<i>Ledalede</i>	The squeezed leaves are chewed with salt to treat diarrhoea [3].
<i>Onwamma</i>	<i>Ricnodendron heudelotii</i>			<i>Kpedi</i>	The stem bark is taken by enema to prevent abortion [4, 3].
<i>Opampena</i>	<i>Albizia adianthifolia</i>		<i>Pamplandza</i>	<i>Vena</i>	A fruit extract is drunk to relieve stomachache [1, 2].
<i>Otannuro</i>	<i>Trichilia monadelphra</i>				Liquid from the boiled bark is used to treat wounds [2].
<i>Ototowa/ Odadee</i>	<i>Adansonia digitata</i>	Baobab	<i>Eadzo</i>	<i>Alagba</i>	The leaves are used to treat kidney diseases, asthma, general fatigue, diarrhoea, insect bites, and guinea worm [10, 7, 2].
<i>Damenam</i>	<i>Mussaenda erythrophylla</i>	Ashanti blood	<i>Yoomo gugosa</i>	<i>Nyela</i>	The root is chewed with guinea grains to cure cough [2].
<i>Dawadawa/ Osɔn</i>	<i>Parkia filicoidea</i>	West African locust bean	<i>Ateomi</i>	<i>Wɔ</i>	A bark decoction is taken to treat malaria, rheumatism, and toothache [1, 3].
<i>Dommo</i>	<i>Volvariella volvacea</i>	Mushroom	<i>Mmleh</i>		
<i>Doroben</i>	<i>Olyra latifolia</i>	Carrycillo	<i>Ododoben</i>		The roots, steeped in spirit, are bitters to free the bowels [2].
<i>Dua-Toa</i>	<i>Crescentia cujete</i>	Calabash tree			The leaves are used to clean dirty wounds [6].
<i>Esia</i>	<i>Combretodendron macrocarpum</i>	Stinkwood	<i>Osa</i>		A bark decoction is drunk to promote sputum secretion (used to treat coughs) [7].
<i>Ɛfan</i>	<i>Amaranthus caudatus</i>	love-lies-bleeding			Used to cure HURAE (a disease that causes violent pains in the limbs [2].
<i>Ɛfere</i>	<i>Cucurbita pepo</i>	Pumpkin	<i>Sakribonte</i>		A deworming agent in children and pregnant women [5].
<i>Ɛmee</i>	<i>Ocimum canum</i>			<i>Defetsui</i>	The leaves are burnt in a room where a sick person sleeps, which is believed to drive away evil spirits [2].
<i>Ɛtene</i>	<i>Heteropogon contortus</i>	Spear grass	<i>Akɔsɔfo</i>		
<i>Famwisa</i>	<i>Amomum granum-paradisi</i>	Guinea grains	<i>Anai-wyei</i>	<i>Aduvee</i>	It is mainly used in enemas, together with many other medicinal plants. A leaf decoction is taken to cure fever [7, 2].
<i>Fofo/N'fofoa</i>	<i>Aspilia latifolia</i>		<i>Nasa</i>		The leaves are mixed with white clay and used as an infusion for stomachache [2].

<i>Twi</i>	<i>Botanical</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Ga</i>	<i>Ewe</i>	<i>Medicinal uses</i>
<i>Framo</i>	<i>Terminalia superba</i>	Shinglewood		<i>Kegblale</i>	The leaves induce urine, and the roots are a laxative [3].
<i>Furuntum</i>	<i>Funtumia elastica</i>	West African rubber	<i>Oseɛ</i>	<i>Funtum</i>	The bark is beaten and is taken in spirit to cure piles [7, 2].
<i>Gyama</i>	<i>Alchornia cordifolia</i>	Christmas bush		<i>Ahame</i>	Ground-up roots and young leaves mixed with white clay and pepper is used as an enema to check abortion [2].
<i>Gyedua</i>	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i>	Shade tree	<i>Honmaiteo</i>	<i>Ani</i>	The bark, mixed with pepper, is used as an enema [2].
<i>Gyeene</i>	<i>Allium ascalonicum</i>	Onion	<i>Sabolai</i>	<i>Sabula</i>	Used to treat colds, flu, and coughs. The warmed juice can be dropped into the ear for earache, and baked onion is used as a poultice to drain pus from sores [5].
<i>Gyinantwi</i>	<i>Bidens Pilosa</i>	Blackjack		<i>Adzɔkpɔii</i>	Juice from the leaves is squeezed into the eyes to cure eye complaints [2].
<i>Hwedee</i>	<i>Cenchrus purpureus</i>	Elephant grass			The plant, or the bruised leaf, is used to stop bleeding [4].
<i>Hwenteaa</i>	<i>Xylopia aethiopica</i>	Grains of Selim	<i>Soo</i>	<i>Etsuo</i>	The seeds are added to several folk medicines [2].
<i>Kagya</i>	<i>Griffonia simplicifolia</i>		<i>Kanya</i>	<i>Gbogbotri</i>	The stems are used as a chewing stick.
<i>Kakapenpen</i>	<i>Rauvolfia vomitoria</i>	The swizzle stick		<i>Dɔdemakpɔwoe</i>	The latex is used for wound scars [1, 3].
<i>Kesɛkesɛ</i>	<i>Dracaena mannii</i>	Asparagus tree			A decoction of boiled leaves is drunk to treat chest pains [3].
<i>Kokora</i>	<i>Dioscorea minutiflora</i>	Bush yam			The leaves are squeezed in water and then added to gin to treat jaundice [4].
<i>Kokrosabia</i>	<i>Cochlospermum planchonii</i>			<i>Kakalito</i>	The powdered root, in water, cures jaundice and is applied to cure bites of poisonous snakes [7].
<i>Kontoa</i>	<i>Lagenaria siceraria</i>	Bottle gourd	<i>Tɔ</i>	<i>Adanga</i>	The fruit rind is used in a decoction to treat problems in the uterus or womb [6, 3].
<i>Kooko</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i>	Taro	<i>Amankani</i>		A leaf decoction is drunk to promote menstruation [3].
<i>Kookoo</i>	<i>Theobroma cacao</i>	Cocoa		<i>Kookoo</i>	Though cacao is most often used as a food, it also has therapeutic value as a nervous system stimulant [5, 7].
<i>Kube</i>	<i>Cocos nucifera</i>	Coconut	<i>Akokoshi</i>	<i>Yevune</i>	The root is boiled with other plants and used as a treatment for bladder ailments and as an aphrodisiac [6].
<i>Kwadu</i>	<i>Musa sapientum</i>	Banana	<i>Akwadu</i>	<i>Kɔdu</i>	The fruit's peel can be abortive [6].

Twi	Botanical	English	Ga	Ewe	Medicinal uses
<i>Kwahu Nsusuua</i>	<i>Solanum nodiflorum</i>	Turkey berries			The leaves and fruits are used to cure sores [2]
<i>Kyenkyen</i>	<i>Antiaris Africana</i>	Bark cloth tree	<i>Kudzo</i>	<i>Logotsi</i>	The latex is applied to cuts, wounds and skin complaints and is taken as a purgative [1, 3].
<i>Kyikyiky</i>	<i>Termitomyces clypeatus</i>	Mushroom	<i>Mmleh</i>		
<i>Lemongrass</i>	<i>Cymbopogon citratus</i>	Lemon grass			The leaves are boiled in water like tea, and the liquor is drunk to cure fever [2].
<i>Mako</i>	<i>Capsicum spp</i>	Pepper	<i>Tɔnɔ or Shitɔ</i>	<i>Tadzi</i>	Often mixed with other plants, it can be taken to relieve gas and colic and to stimulate the secretion of digestive juices [5].
<i>Mankani</i>	<i>Xanthosoma sagittifolium</i>	Cocoyam	<i>Amankani</i>	<i>Amankani</i>	The leaves are used to cure wounds [2].
<i>Mmaakube</i>	<i>Borassus flabellifer</i>	Fan palm	<i>Wiedo</i>	<i>Agor</i>	The bark decoction, with salt, is used as a mouthwash [3].
<i>Mmatatwene</i>	<i>Cercestis afzelii</i>				The ground stem is mixed with water and drunk to treat gonorrhoea [1].
<i>Mpampuro</i>	<i>Oxytenanthera abyssinica</i>	Bamboo	<i>Pamploo</i>	<i>Pamplo</i>	The rhizome is used to treat dysentery [4].
<i>Mpempenaa</i>	<i>Termitomyces macrocarpa</i>	Mushroom	<i>Mmleh</i>		
<i>Mpupua</i>	<i>Pupalia lappacea</i>		<i>Memlente</i>	<i>Mitsimitsi</i>	The leaves are mixed with palm oil and applied to boils [2].
<i>Nkamfoɔ</i>	<i>Dioscorea dumetorum</i>	Bitter yam	<i>Nkamfo</i>		When the tuber is boiled, the liquid can be drunk to treat jaundice and malaria [4].
<i>Nkankoma</i>	<i>Pluteus cervinus</i>	Mushroom	<i>Mmleh</i>		
<i>Nkatee</i>	<i>Arachis hypogea</i>	Groundnut	<i>Nkatie</i>	<i>Makate</i>	
<i>Nkrangyedua</i>	<i>Jatropha curcas</i>	Physic nut	<i>Kplukateo</i>	<i>Babatsi</i>	Juice from the leaves is used to treat decayed teeth [6].
<i>Nkranpan</i>	<i>Loranthus spp.</i>	African mistletoe		<i>Logbloti</i>	Pregnant women drink liquor produced from the boiled leaves [2].
<i>Nkruma</i>	<i>Abelmoschus esculentus</i>	Okra	<i>Enmomi</i>	<i>Fetri or Bodro</i>	A decoction of the immature okra fruits is used to relieve irritation, increase urine passing, and soothe the skin [9].
<i>Nkudua</i>	<i>Butyrospermum parkii</i> or <i>Vitellaria paradoxa</i>	Shea butter tree	<i>Nku</i>	<i>Yokuti</i>	It is applied to relieve joint pains and to heal wounds, swellings, bruises, and other skin problems [1, 3].
<i>Nnuadewaa/ Niorowa</i>	<i>Solanum aethiopicum</i>	Garden egg	<i>Sebe</i>	<i>Agbitsa</i>	The crushed and macerated fruits are used as an enema [3].
<i>Nnye Me Na Nnyene Me</i>	<i>Thevetia peruviana</i>	Milk bush	<i>Sibiteo</i>		The seeds are chewed as purgative, but some view it as poisonous [2]; an infusion of the roots is taken for snakebites [1].

<i>Twi</i>	<i>Botanical</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Ga</i>	<i>Ewe</i>	<i>Medicinal uses</i>
<i>Nsansono</i>	<i>Tragia bentharii</i>	Nettle			A root and leaf decoction is taken to promote conception [3].
<i>Nsɔkɔ-Dua</i>	<i>Garcinia afzelii</i>				The root, soaked in palm wine or gin, is aphrodisiac [7].
<i>Nsusuaa</i>	<i>Solanum scalare</i>	African eggplant		<i>Dzukuwi</i>	Used in soups to restore lost appetite [2].
<i>Ntɔn</i>	<i>Pandanus candelabrum</i>	Screw pine	<i>Ntɔn</i>	<i>Kpa</i>	
<i>Ntɔmme</i>	<i>Dracaena arborea.</i>	Tree dracaena	<i>Nkonya nyankuntɔn</i>	<i>Anya</i>	Used for stomach troubles, kidney problems, heart conditions menstrual issues [4].
<i>Ntoose</i>	<i>Solanum lycopersicum</i>	Tomato	<i>Amoo</i>	<i>Timati</i>	A leave paste is applied to filarial worm swellings [4, 3].
<i>Ntwuropo</i>	<i>Solanum melongena</i>	Egg plant	<i>Atorokpo</i>		Used as part of a diet to help regulate high blood pressure [5].
<i>Nufuten(e)</i>	<i>Kigelia Africana</i>	Sausage tree	<i>Tɛtɛtɛto</i>	<i>Nyakpekpe</i>	The fruits are cut and boiled with peppers, and the liquor is drunk to cure constipation and piles [2, 9].
<i>Nunum</i>	<i>Ocimum gratissimum</i>	Tea bush	<i>Sru</i>	<i>Bebusui</i>	Oil from the leaf has antibacterial properties [6].
<i>Nwere</i>	<i>Acacia pennata or Senegalia pennata</i>	Climbing wattle		<i>Damalia</i>	A leaf decoction is used to treat body pain, fevers, and headaches [3].
<i>Nyame Nwu Na M'awu</i>	<i>Commelina nudiflora</i>	Carolina dayflower	<i>To' lilei</i>	<i>Agbɔmaku maku</i>	It can be used to cure <i>Okwaha</i> (gout) [2].
<i>Nyamedua</i>	<i>Alstonia congensis</i>	Stool wood		<i>Nyemidua</i>	A bark decoction is used to treat malaria, gonorrhoea, and diarrhoea [1].
<i>Nyankyerene</i>	<i>Ficus exasperata</i>	Sandpaper tree	<i>Nyankese</i>	<i>Tsatsaflala</i>	Water with the seed powder is drunk to cure fever [1].
<i>Nyanyamforowa/ Satadua</i>	<i>Mallotus oppositifolius</i>		<i>Tetɛɛdua</i>	<i>Srɔti</i>	The ground leaves are mixed with food to cure dysentery [2].
<i>Odum</i>	<i>Chlorophora excelsa or Milicia excelsa</i>	African teak		<i>Odum</i>	A root decoction is taken to treat female sterility. A root decoction and stem bark is taken as an aphrodisiac [3, 1].
<i>Odwuma</i>	<i>Musanga cecropioides</i>	Umbrella tree	<i>Odzuma</i>	<i>Dzama</i>	A bark decoction is used as a gargle to treat toothache [4, 8].
<i>Onyina</i>	<i>Ceiba pentadra</i>	Kapok tree	<i>Onyaiteo</i>	<i>Vuti</i>	A decoction of the tender shoots is used as a contraceptive [10].
<i>Osisire/ Kokonisuo</i>	<i>Spathodea campanulate</i>	African tulip tree	<i>Voteo</i>	<i>Adatsigo</i>	The boiled, dried leaves are used to treat chronic sores [2].

<i>Twɪ</i>	<i>Botanical</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Ga</i>	<i>Ewe</i>	<i>Medicinal uses</i>
<i>Otie</i>	<i>Pycnanthus angolensis</i>				The juice from the stem is sucked to cure mouth sores [2].
<i>Oware</i>	<i>Caesalpinia bonduc</i> or <i>Guilandina bonduc</i>	Nicker nut		<i>Wɔle</i>	The powdered seeds are applied to the eyes to prevent spots from forming over the cornea [7]; taken with water to treat diabetes mellitus [1, 3].
<i>Pepeadiawuo</i>	<i>Datura metel</i>	Indian Thornapple,			A pounded leaf is used to smear the floors of houses to kill lice and other vermin [2].
<i>Peteprebi/ Namprane</i>	<i>Gardenia ternifolia</i>		<i>Kpetekplebii</i>	<i>Flife</i>	The burned roots and leaves are ground into powder and mixed with palm wine and guinea grains to treat constipation [2].
<i>Prekese</i>	<i>Tetrapleura tetraptera</i>	Aiden tree		<i>(A)prekese</i>	The seed is used to treat gastrointestinal disorders, malaria and other fevers, and snake bites [2, 3].
<i>Sahoma</i>	<i>Millettia zechiana</i>				The bark and leaves are used as painkillers [4].
<i>Samanta</i>	<i>Calpocalyx brevibracteatus</i>				A maceration of the bark is applied as a mouthwash to treat sores [1, 3].
<i>Sɔprɔpɔ</i>	<i>Momordica foetida</i>				It is given to women in cases of difficult delivery [4].
<i>Sensam</i>	<i>Aframomum melegueta</i>	Grains of paradise		<i>Megbe-dogboe</i>	Nursing mothers take the root decoction to check excessive lactation and to control post-delivery bleeding [9, 2].
<i>Sesea</i>	<i>Trema guineensis</i>	Charcoal tree		<i>Wadzawadza</i>	A bark decoction is a cough syrup [11], while the leaves are used for throat troubles, asthma, and yellow fever [7].
<i>Sibire</i>	<i>Schumannianthus dichotomus</i>				
<i>Somme</i>	<i>Costus afer</i>	Spiral gingers			A decoction of the powdered fruits is used to treat cough [8], and the leaves for religious rituals [2].
<i>Sorowisa</i>	<i>Piper guineense</i>	Ashanti pepper	<i>Gbowisi</i>	<i>Kukuli</i>	The leaves are eaten in soup to aid conception [2].
<i>Toatini</i>	<i>Paullinia pinnata</i>		<i>Gbobilo-manu</i>	<i>Gbadzafeka</i>	Pregnant women drink boiled leaves to stop miscarriage [2].
<i>Tweapea</i>	<i>Garcinia kola</i>	Bitter kola			The raw bark is purgative [7].
<i>Tweneboa</i>	<i>Cordia millenii</i>	Drum tree			A leaf decoction is taken to treat asthma, colds, and coughs [4].
<i>Twitɔn</i>	<i>Dracaena trifasciata</i> or <i>Sansevieria trifasciata</i>	Mother-in-law's tongue	<i>Gblɔ</i>	<i>Ayidabo or Dzogbebladzoe</i>	Used to treat ringworm and fungal diseases [3]; fibre from leaves is used for tying the navels of newly born babies [2].
<i>Mmoɣra Forowa</i>	<i>Abutilon Asiaticum</i>			<i>Kusiti</i>	The leaves are mashed in water, and native peppers are added; and small quantities are drunk every ten minutes to cure gonorrhoea [2].

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